



# First United Church of Oak Park

An Apple, Sin, and the Fall?  
Genesis 3  
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In this season of Lent, we have embarked on sermon series in which we are exploring the problem of evil in the world. Our scripture reading today, Genesis Chapter 3, is how our early ancestors sought to understand the problem of evil in the world.

But before we dive into the third chapter of Genesis, it's important to remember, the two preceding chapters are how we kick off the entire bible, and in those two chapters we are given two different creation stories. In Genesis 1, in the order of creation, God created humans last. In Genesis 2, the first thing God created was the first human, who was created from Adamah, which means "dust of the earth." God breathed the breath of life into the nostrils to create the first living being. And out of a desire for the first human to not be lonely God then creates a companion from the first human's rib. You are familiar with both of these stories, you probably know them like the back of your hand, right?

Maybe some of you didn't realize there are two creation stories in Genesis. You have heard them both so many times that maybe your memory fused them together without realizing it and its hard to know which story is which and over time the details seem to have become less important. But I have come to realize that it is the things that we are most familiar with, that we are closest to, with which we lose our ability to see clearly. It is hard to take a step back from it, and nearly impossible to imagine that we are wrong or that we need to reconsider where we stand. I fear this is the case with Genesis 3.

This text and this sermon are going to challenge what you thought you knew, maybe what you believe. I do not promise you will walk out of here with all the answers you want; you may walk out with more questions than you started with, but that's ok! You won't be alone.

Before we pick apart the text, we're going to see how familiar you are with it, we're going to take a pop quiz! Take a moment to read the 6 questions in your bulletin at the end of the order of worship, think about your answers and you can jot them down if you want. Then you will hear the scripture and listen for answers to the questions. The questions are:

- Q1: what kind of fruit did they eat off the tree?
- Q2: who told a lie?
- Q3: who gives Eve her name?
- Q4: who is the serpent?
- Q5: where do the man and woman get garments of skin?
- Q6: what tree was God afraid the humans would eat from?

Listen now for the word of God...

[Reader's theatre of Genesis 3]

This is the word of God for the people of God, thanks be to God.

Will you pray with me...Gracious God, bless us with understanding. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight. Amen.

So how did you do on the pop quiz?

Q1: Raise your hand if you wrote an apple.

Nowhere in the bible does it say what kind of fruit they ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. But for some reason, we associate an apple with this story.

Q2: Raise your hand if you wrote the serpent or snake. In actuality, the serpent did not lie; he simply assured them of what would actually happen if they ate the fruit. Their eyes were opened, just as he said they would be.

Q3: Raise your hand if you wrote God. It was in fact the man, who has come to be known as Adam, who gave Eve her name.

Q4: Raise your hand if you wrote Satan or the devil. The text gives no indication that the serpent is anything other than one of the many creatures of creation.

Q5: Raise your hand if you wrote "they made them." In fact, God gave them the garments of skin, they initially made loincloths from fig leaves.

Q6: Raise your hand if you wrote the Tree of Knowledge of Good and evil. This was the tree that God told them not to eat from and they did; but it was actually the Tree of Life that God was afraid they would eat from, which is why they were sent out of the garden and the Cherubim was placed to guard that tree.

Don't worry; I'm not collecting these quizzes for a grade. And before preparing this sermon, I would not have gotten all of the answers correct.

The origin stories in Genesis have become so familiar to us through years of telling and retelling that we rarely take the time to read the text and see what it actually says and where it says what. This wouldn't be such a bad thing if there weren't so much riding on this one chapter, but it has come to play a large role in understanding our very nature. Our humanity is at stake because Genesis chapter 3 has come to be known as the account of "The Fall" and it the basis for the Doctrine of Original Sin. You have just heard this entire chapter read aloud, and nowhere in it did it say the word "fall" or "sin" just like it did not contain the word "apple." But again, when we are so familiar with something, it's hard to see it clearly and we read details into it that aren't there.

So where did this idea of sin and "the fall" come from? We always hear and talk about how Jesus died for our sins. Is sin how we relate to God? Our origin stories don't mention sin and I don't remember sin being Jesus' main focus in the gospel. The message Jesus preached is a story not about how sin separates us from God, but rather a story of a God who is so loving of us and intent on being with us that God became human to help us embody the wholeness and fullness of life that we were made for. The gospel is an invitation to participate in the blessing of God. Then why does it seem that sin plays a starring role in Christianity? Well, because we took a wrong turn somewhere along the way; and that turn was the doctrine of original sin.

The Doctrine of Original Sin argues two things: 1) that when the first humans ate the fruit in the Garden, something negatively and permanently shifted in their nature; and 2) this nature has been passed on to every human being since. Meaning, we are predisposed to sin, we are born sinful. I don't know about you, but this a notion that I have struggled with.

In fact, this doctrine was a later interpretation of Genesis 3 from people with their own theologies and worldviews which are not necessarily reflected in the text itself. Evidently, if we look back at the earliest affirmations of faith in the Reformed tradition: the Apostles Creed and the Nicene creed, we find that all they have to say about “sins” is that they are forgiven, nothing about belief in an inborn, sinful, fallen state of humanity.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. What does Genesis actually say about human nature? If we go back to when humans are created, in both creation stories God calls them “good.” God calls us good and beloved before we are anything else. Humans were not created sinful or evil, so sin is not at the heart of our nature; goodness is, blessing is. And if we take a closer look at Genesis 3, even though the humans disobeyed God we find that God does not remove the original blessing that was bestowed on them when they were created. God bestows two curses in Genesis 3: one on the serpent and the other on the land.

Neither of the humans are cursed. There are consequences for their actions, but they are not “cursed.” That is another thing that we have read into this text. In fact, God covers the humans with garments of skin showing that they still belong to God and that God cares for them. So if the first humans didn’t have a sinful nature and yet they sinned, and God still loved them, why can’t the same be true for us?

Genesis 3 was a story of the oral tradition for generations before being written down. It was then translated and interpreted again and again which makes it a complex text, but if we break it down we find it is a story of choices and consequences, blessings and curses. It’s not an either/or kind of situation, because that’s not the world we live in; we live in a world of both/and. As much as we like to live in dualities that just isn’t reality. No one is all good or all evil. Human nature was created to be as diverse and complex as the rest of creation, but here in our origin texts we find that at the heart of our creation and our nature is God’s blessing.

Let us, for a moment, consider our expectations of Genesis 3. Are they not perhaps too demanding or ambitious? For comparison sake, the story of Jesus, the main character of our religion, took four gospels, hundreds of chapters, thousands of verses to tell, and we still don’t feel like it was enough. And yet, somehow, we are satisfied with one chapter, just 24 verses in Genesis, to tell us everything we need to know about sin, human nature, and humankind’s struggle?

Poor Genesis 3; that hardly seems fair, not to mention what it means for us. Often when we talk about reading scripture, we say it’s important to read it contextually. Therefore, I want to reiterate that this chapter in Genesis was how our early ancestors, thousands of years ago, sought to understand the problem of evil in the world among other features of their existence.

But in the case of Genesis 3, it’s important to read it literarily as well – as literature, holy, inspired literature, but literature, nonetheless. A story passed down from generation to generation, told around the fire, endures thousands of years and here it comes to us today, still with much to offer and wrestle with. It is good literature with a narrator, intriguing characters, conflict, climax and resolution. But rather than asking this text to be the sole spiritual, philosophical, and sociological statement about humanity we could choose to accept it as a story from scripture that is meant to provoke us in ways that move us toward God. It is a story to spark many good questions to wrestle with, but maybe not the best source to provide us with definitive answers.

I do not find in Genesis 3 the basis for the doctrine of original sin and the fact of the matter is, we do a disservice and serious damage when we interpret this story to say “Humans are evil, fallen creatures.” Because it means when we look at the suffering in the world, all we can feel is a sense of hopelessness and

become immobilized. To believe we are inherently evil beings means we internalize shame, which paralyzes and isolates us. But if we believe that at the heart of our nature is blessing, that we were created good and that sometimes we make bad choices, then we have the ability to change, to grow, and to respond to and reciprocate God's love.

I don't think we will ever understand why evil exists, nor are we meant to. But I do not believe the problem of evil exists because of a snake or a piece of fruit, nor do I believe that humans are depraved creatures. Evil is a reality that we cannot deny, but when faced with it we have the ability to choose to remember and focus on God's blessing of us and let our faith motivate us to make good choices instead of allowing it to leave us hopelessly ashamed of ourselves.

God called us good. The biggest, most revolutionary, most important gift God has ever given us is blessing. Without blessing we would not exist, we wouldn't know grace, mercy, or forgiveness. Without blessing there is no steadfast love, no covenant, no Jesus, no Spirit, no kingdom of God. The universe may have started with a big bang, but our relationship with God started with blessing, not sin.

God knew you before you were born, knit you together while you were still in the womb, and called you good. You are God's beloved. God's blessing is as steadfast as God's love; that is a detail of our origin story we can't afford to overlook or misinterpret. May you remember and know that like the back of your hand.

Amen

This sermon is owed in large part to Danielle Shroyer and the thoughts and ideas presented in her book *Original Blessing: Putting Sin in its Rightful Place*, which is quoted throughout much of this sermon.