

[Link to view service/sermon via FaceBook: First Christian Church Decatur](#)

***“Free Agency and the Agent Provocateur”***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Lent, Sunday, March 13, 2022

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

**Holy Scriptures: Genesis 3: 1-7 Matthew 7: 15-20**

Worship Theme

*God of creation and re-creation,  
strengthen our relationship with you,  
especially whenever we are tested and tempted.*

*Remind us of the power of your unblemished Word  
and the unequivocal gift of free will,  
each of which are your original blessings upon humanity.*

*Grant us the fullness of your forgiveness,  
that, repentant and grateful,  
united by your grace,  
we may stand as one people with Christ  
against the powers of evil.*

*Amen.*

**Genesis 3: 1-7**

Now the serpent had more naked intelligence than any other animal of the field that the Sovereign God had made. And it said to the woman, “Indeed, did God say, ‘You two shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?” The woman said to the serpent, “From the fruit of any tree in the garden we may eat, though of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, God said, ‘You two shall not eat and shall not touch it lest you two die.’” Then the serpent said to the woman, “You two will certainly not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you two will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her man, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

**Matthew 7: 15-20**

[Jesus said] “Beware of false prophets, who will come to you all in sheep’s clothing but inside are ravenous wolves. By their fruits you will know them. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or from thistles, figs? Thus, every good tree bears beautiful fruit, but the rotten tree bears wicked fruit. A good tree cannot bear wicked fruit, nor can a corrupt tree bear beautiful fruit. Every tree that does not bear beautiful fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus will you know them by their fruits.”

### Sermon

When Children’s Church ended  
    one of the young people was very eager  
        to tell his mother what he had learned.  
He told her all about how God created the world and them Adam and Eve,  
    and all about how Eve was taken from Adam’s side.  
However, a few days later he came home from school quite distressed.  
Asked what the matter was, he said,  
    *“My side hurts. I think I’m going to have a wife.”*

### ***Breaking Back into Eden***

From the moment we oozed and crawled out of rivers and oceans  
    to stand upright for the first time,  
        shaky, trembling, testing the sandy shore,  
            humankind wondered  
                how we became who we are now  
                    from what we were before.

Our primal minds reflexively recall to way back when, to once upon a time,  
    to way back before we could articulate a sense of God or human free will,  
        way back to the generation when we began to evolve into Homo Sapiens,  
            the first human communities  
                who acknowledged a One Who Created and Creates.

One day it dawned on our forebearers that there is a Big Love  
    who cares about the choices we make,  
        who forewarns us of consequences and challenges,  
            who seeks day and night to relate with love and forgiving grace,  
                a providential Creator  
                    using covenantal language  
                        and an abiding presence.

Maybe it was the moment when two early Homo Sapiens sat quietly by a campfire.  
Suddenly Grog, for no reason at all, whacked Yuloo with a branch.

Yoluu exclaimed, *"Ouch! Good Lord!*

*What did you do that for, Grog? That's not right!"*

From that sacred moment began the evolution of spiritual enlightenment.  
The fields of theology and ethics were born,  
and we have not been the same since.

Yuloo, maybe more so than Grog, immediately saw the light,  
not wanting to be unjustly hit again with a branch.  
Yuloo expressed the communal need for ethical boundaries and moral borders,  
the gift and challenge of free agency of choice,  
and that a Good Lord  
might have a lot to say about human rights and wrongs.

From that moment on  
friends, enemies, families, tribes, hunters and gatherers  
sat around campfires,  
arguing and discussing and discerning  
the meaning of God,  
the meaning of free will,  
the meaning of life.

Questions and wonderings, doubts and faith bubbled up from their souls.

- What is acceptable and good?
- What is a violation of human rights?
- What helps us to best define our personal, moral, communal borders and boundaries?
- Whose Voice is this that speaks to us from the Great Beyond?  
Whose Voice do we hear deep within our hearts and minds?  
Whose Voice is calling us to respect and recognize all persons,  
to be good stewards of creation?

### ***Breaking Back into Eden***

Stories, narratives, mythology, and tales  
serve well to remind and define, express and explain who and whose we are.

Gathered around campfires in front of caves or huts, lean-tos or cabins,  
our forbearers told stories -- stories that have legs! –  
stories that last and are lasting.

If one doesn't have a written language,

stories are how we pass along the essence of our lives.  
Stories serve to articulate and wrestle  
with how we got from there to here,  
from oozing out of the muck into the light,  
and who led us  
into the light  
of peace, love and understanding.  
We err when we seek to read ancients tales literally,  
as if they are historical facts and not narratives with deep spiritual meaning.

John Dominic Crossan addressed this, saying,  
*“My point, once again, is not that those ancient people told literal stories  
and we are now smart enough  
to take them symbolically,  
but that they told them symbolically  
and we are now dumb enough to take them literally.”*

### ***Breaking Back into Eden***

As you know, Genesis opens with two Creation stories.

Genesis 1 imagines God creating the universe and earth,  
living creatures and humanity in 6 days, then resting on the seventh.

Genesis 2 describes God forming humans from dust from the ground,  
breathing life into their nostrils,  
then planting a garden in Eden, in the east,  
and there God put the two whom God had formed.

The first Creation story in Genesis 1  
explores how we came to be on this blue planet spinning in the sky.

The second Creation story that begins in Genesis 2  
explores why.

The Bible reads:

*The Lord God took the human and put him in the garden of Eden  
to till it and keep it.*

*And the Lord God commanded the human,*

*“You may freely eat of every tree of the garden;  
but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat,  
for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” --Genesis 2:15-17*

In effect, God the Creator, the Parent, the Rule Setter, said:

I made you, breathed life into you, provided for you, and given you free will.  
Free agency.  
Freedom of choice.  
You may go this far, and no further, or else.  
Listen to me, heed me, and all will be well.

Enter the serpent.  
Serpent was also created by God, just as God made all of creation.  
The entrance of the serpent begins with a pun in Hebrew,  
playing with the word naked, arom and arum. <sup>[1]</sup>

In Genesis 2 we overhear,  
*"And the man and his woman were both arom, naked,  
and were not ashamed..."*

Genesis 3 begins:  
*Now the serpent had more arum, naked intelligence  
than any other animal of the field that the Sovereign God had made.*

*And [the serpent] said to the woman, "Indeed, did God say,  
'You two shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'"*

*The woman said to the serpent,  
"From the fruit of any tree in the garden we may eat,  
though of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden,  
God said, 'You two shall not eat and shall not touch  
it lest you two die.'"*

*Then the serpent said to the woman,  
"You two will certainly not die;  
for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened,  
and you two will be like God, knowing good and evil."*

### **Breaking Back into Eden**

Let's stop here.  
Let's pause to reflect.  
Is that what God said?  
What did you hear?  
Did God really say, *'you two shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'*  
This is a misquote.  
The serpent also changes God's singular command of *"you shall not eat"*  
from masculine singular to an inclusive plural,  
from *"you"* to *"you two shall not eat"*

What do you suspect the serpent is really doing, saying, conniving?

“In the serpent God creates a creature  
who will stir human curiosity to potentially dangerous limits.” <sup>[2]</sup>

Let's put aside our cultural perspective of the serpent.  
Through art and books and Sunday School classes  
we were told to view the serpent as Satan, a tempter,  
in the same vein as the tempter who approached Jesus in the wilderness.

The serpent is not Satan.

Consider the seeing the serpent not as tempter but as tester. <sup>[3]</sup>

Agent Provocateur.

Tester of given borders and boundaries.

Fall guy to blame

whenever we make poor or harmful or damaging decisions.

What do we do when given boundaries?

The tester knows!

You can go through any door except that one...now we are curious.

What do we do when given a border or a limit, make a promise or a covenant?

“Test them, bend them, break them.” <sup>[4]</sup>

Covenants made in public will be tested in private.

Promises made before others will be tested in private.

Vows made in sacred spaces before God and one another will be tested in private.

### ***Breaking Back into Eden***

“The serpent also tests something else

– how humans hear, remember, tell, question, interpret God's words.” <sup>[5]</sup>

The serpent misinterprets, misrepresents, misquotes God.

Saying: “*You two will certainly not die...*”

*...for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened,  
and you two will be like God, knowing good and evil.*”

Seems all well and good...except this was not God's recorded speech.

They certainly did not die that day from eating the sacred tree's fruit,

because we know from skipping ahead in the story

that life and death and life everlasting would be forthcoming.

I know how beguiling it is to rewrite and redefine holy writ.

From my first sermon in Elizabeth, New Jersey,

delivered in a Vacation Bible School to a group of squirmy 5 and 6-year-olds,  
to today, 39 years hence,  
I get visited regularly by the serpent  
to test me, taunt me, misguide me  
to preach to the Church and Community,  
*"Let me tell you what Jesus really meant to say..."*

How many of us have misquoted the Bible,  
saying *"...money is the root of all evil"*,  
when here is what Bible really says in First Timothy 6: 10  
*"For the love of money is the root of all evil:  
which while some coveted after,  
they have erred from the faith,  
and pierced themselves through with many sorrows."*

Monty Python's Flying Circus took a shot at the phenomenon in a film.  
Jesus is preaching the Sermon on the Mount and says, *"Blessed are the peacemakers."*  
Someone listening from way in the back asks what Jesus said.  
A neighbor responds, *"I think he said, 'Blessed are the cheesemakers.'"*

What a difference it makes to be accurate and on target,  
to back up to the primary Source and become a channel for the Word.

When testers slither and slide up next to you in the guise of a friend,  
our first challenge to their tests  
is not to be dissuaded or diverted or distracted  
from the love of God,  
who provides, gives life, offers love,  
guides our ethical and moral choices.

When testers misquote or misrepresent the Big Love of God and Christ's Church,  
we resist their wiles by staying in tune with the Spirit of God.

Know the difference  
between the charms of a tester  
and the blessings of a Triune God.

Revisit our primal, earliest, original understanding of the Garden of Eden.

To refute a testers subterfuge,  
be confident in the blessed assurance  
that you are made good,  
in the image of God,  
that you are a blessing,  
given by God and guided by the Word of God.

## ***Breaking Back into Eden***

I used to believe in Original Sin.  
Then my eyes were opened anew by the teaching of Matthew Fox <sup>[6]</sup> and others  
that the Garden of Eden in Genesis  
is about Original Blessing.  
Original Blessing, not original sin.

If there is anything that flows and stands out in both Creation stories,  
it is that we are made good, in the image of God,  
made in love, made with love,  
and given in love to the world.

This sacred, positive, loving teaching  
was once standard fare.  
Original Blessing was what was offered for centuries and centuries  
around campfires and dinner tables, in temples and house churches.

1,600 years ago Augustine of Hippo  
flipped our sacred, imaginative narrative of faith  
on its ear.

Around 400 AD, Augustine invented out of his own mind the theology of Original Sin.

Augustine sought to redefine and reinterpret Holy Scripture.  
His take on the second Creation story is that sex is sinful,  
that humans are sinners at birth,  
that we are doomed to everlasting death and banishment  
unless we are saved by the Living Christ,  
whose death redeems us from our sinful nature and natures.

Prior to Augustine, the Church taught Original Blessing.

However, Augustine of Hippo's personal take on Original Sin  
spiraled across the ages,  
commanded center stage,  
dominated the airwaves,  
affected our perception of God and Eve and Adam  
and our own worthiness.

Christianity has been teaching some version of Original Sin for some 1,600 years.  
Let's break back into Eden.

Be bold.

Claim a fresh, holistic, organic perspective on grace and goodness and God.



We might get bent out of shape, feel uncomfortable, duck and run for cover.  
I did; you may, as well.

That's okay.

Trust that our Creator has the power to re-create,  
to work powerful, divine magic, might and mystery,  
to reshape and restore our malleable hearts & minds.

One of our Original Blessings is that we do have free will,  
we do have choices, options that God gave to us on purpose.  
The Garden of Eden was not a fairy castle nor Neverland nor Utopia.  
It was a launching pad, a home for learning lessons and carrying them forward.  
Questions as old as time were addressed there, learned the hard way, and stuck with us.

One of our late, beloved church members named Bonnie Darsie  
told me she graduated from SHK.  
What is SHK? "The School of Hard Knocks."

### ***Breaking Back into Eden***

If I ever had any doubts about the joys of acknowledging  
that we are born beautiful and whole and blessed gifts of God,  
then those qualms faded away  
when confirmation arrived in an email from my mother.

A couple years ago my mother, Elizabeth "Buffy" Stuart Calvert, Esq., 91,  
received a copy of a sermon I delivered on Psalm 51.

She fired back an email.

Now, as you know, in Psalm 51 the Psalmist writes:

*"Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me."*

Buffy responded, writing in all caps:

"[BY THE WAY] YOU WERE CONCEIVED IN LOVE NOT SIN  
AND WERE ABSOLUTELY PERFECT WHEN YOU WERE BORN.  
Tell that to Psalm 51, one of my favorite [psalms] except for that line.  
Love, Mother"

My friends, you were conceived in love,  
and absolutely perfect when you were born.

We are birthed into the world as gifts of God,  
given to creation as Original Blessings.

From the moment we are born,  
emerging from the womb, curious, wondering,  
eager to explore and stand on shaky legs on new lands,  
we have this gift of God  
called free will, free agency, freedom of choice.

The point of being good people, of making good decisions,  
of respecting good borders and healthy boundaries  
is not to get a star on our heavenly crown.

The point of communal and personal goodness  
is to embody the love of God.

We have this gift of free will, of free agency to choose one way or another,  
to choose the weapons of war and destruction  
or the weapons of loving kindness and mercy.

From the Garden of Eden to the Garden of Gethsemane,  
God has been calling to us to love.

Love God.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

The purpose of Jesus Christ's life and death and resurrection  
was to influence humankind toward moral improvement,  
to be good in the human context,  
to be a light to the nations.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

---

<sup>[1]</sup> Wilda C. Gafney, A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church, Year W, Church Publishing Inc., 2021. Pg. 79.

<sup>[2]</sup> Gafney, Pg 80.

<sup>[3]</sup> Gafney, Pg 80.

<sup>[4]</sup> Gafney, Pg 80.

<sup>[5]</sup> Gafney, Pg 80.

<sup>[6]</sup> Matthew Fox, Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality, Bear and Co., 1983.