

Montague Pastoral Charge

February 22, 2026 – 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7, Matthew 4:1-11

Sermon

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With the single exception in the case that you happen to be Harry Potter, whenever a snake talks to you, you would do best not to answer. Not that there's anything wrong with snakes. They're God's creatures too; they're fascinating and important and beautiful in their own way. But if one of them has learned to talk, the rest of us are clearly out of our league, and our guard should be up. If the serpent in the Garden of Eden represents the voice of evil – the tempter or the devil (if you want to use that word) – it would have been better for Eve not to answer. When she starts to discuss the matter on the snake's terms, she's already lost the debate. He's just better at this. He is “more crafty than any other wild creature that God had made.” Instantly, the snake sows confusion in Eve's mind. “Has God told you the truth? Has God told the whole truth? Isn't there something unfair about having this beautiful tree in the middle of the garden, with such tempting fruit, and not being allowed to eat it? Isn't there something unkind about a God who would withhold the gift of knowledge?”

They say that “knowledge is power,” and it's very true. But that means that knowledge needs to be handled as carefully as power needs to be handled. Power can be used for good or bad, and so can knowledge. Take nuclear science: it can power cities or it can blow them up. That's why we keep on hearing about these tense negotiations with the nation of Iran, as they try to develop a nuclear program. What's it *for*? Knowledge, and the power that comes with knowledge, is neither good nor bad; it depends how you use it.

We're born with minds that are thirsty for knowledge. Human beings are built to learn; it's in our nature. Discovering new things, wanting to know more and more – that's a huge part of who we are. With a two-year-old in the house, I get to see that every day. A very good measure of mental health is your curiosity; you could almost say that curiosity is the direct antithesis of depression. One of the best things you can do for your mental wellness is to rekindle your curiosity and learn something new.

So it would seem the serpent in the Garden of Eden has a point: is God trying to stifle this healthy human instinct for knowledge? Well, I don't think so. It isn't just *any* knowledge that the snake is tempting Eve with, it's the knowledge of good and evil – the knowledge that belongs to God. Notice how it isn't knowledge for the sake of knowledge. He's not suggesting knowledge for the sheer joy of discovery; this is knowledge for a purpose – and a nefarious purpose. Knowledge for the sake of knowledge is a good thing, that's just what we would call curiosity. When a child checks out all the books on dinosaurs out of the library because they just love dinosaurs and they want to know everything about them, that's a good thing. But if the child is getting out the books on dinosaurs so that they can engineer their own “Jurassic Park” and unleash a Tyrannosaurus Rex on their schoolmates, that's no longer knowledge for its own sake. That's when you have to be careful.

For Eve, the temptation is not knowledge for the sake of knowledge. This is not just the delight of learning about the world. No, the temptation is this: “You shall be like God, knowing good and evil.” “You shall be like God”... that’s not curiosity, that’s something more crude: a desire for status. Knowledge for the sake of power. The desire to be the judge, the person who gets to pronounce what is good and what is bad. When Eve decided to eat the fruit, it says that there were three reasons: “when the woman saw that the tree was (#1) good for food and (#2) that it was a delight to the eyes and (#3) that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate.” If Eve had eaten it for reasons #1 or #2 – because it was tasty and attractive – things might have been OK. She still would have disobeyed, but those are pretty good reasons. They’re just about the fruit. But the third reason is the problem: to make herself “wise,” or rather, “like God.”

Whenever we face temptation, the most important thing is to identify, as quickly as possible, where God is. And if you can’t find God, invoke God into the situation. Because temptation is usually the time when you feel like God has abandoned you in the wilderness. If you were watching Jesus for his 40-day fast in the desert, you would probably think that he was abandoned by God, too. There was no bright cloud of glory like we heard about last week, no voice from heaven, no burning bush. When we are tempted to do the wrong thing – whether it’s to eat the cookie, have the drink, say the thing you know will cause more harm than good – whatever it is, the first thing to do is to locate God in that moment. God may be present in words. That’s how it was when Jesus was tempted: words from scripture that he had at the ready. Or maybe God is to be found in your conscience; God may be giving you that gnawing sense of discomfort that’s telling you to back off. What’s certain is that God *is* with you and is ready to be called on for help.

So then, where is God in Eden? Where is God when the snake slips into the garden to spoil everything? Because it seems like God is off somewhere else, leaving poor, naïve Adam and Eve without a babysitter. It seems they’ve been abandoned by God, left to deal with an enemy that they are no match for.

But God is there. God is always there. Remember that there are two trees in the middle of the garden: the tree of knowledge and the tree of life. It’s very important that they’re in the *middle*. The middle of our life, the *centre* of who we are, is God, and it’s in the middle of the Garden of Eden that we should look for God. We could easily imagine a version of the story where the tree of knowledge is not in the middle of the garden, but, say, just outside the garden. Maybe God commands them to stay within the walls of the garden and not to wander off. But Eve, curious to know what lies beyond their little domain, goes exploring to the edges of paradise. Maybe she comes to a great stone wall at the edge, and she sees the forbidden fruit dangling over the edge, enticing her to climb over and reach past her limits.

That sounds convincing – it sounds like the beginning of a dozen Disney films. But that’s not how the story goes. Both life and knowledge are in the *middle* of the garden. Because the centre of our life is God, and these two trees together point to God. The tree of life – the source of our creation and the thing that sustains us every day – that is God. And the knowledge of good and evil – well, it’s only God who has that knowledge; it’s only God who can handle that knowledge. Together, the tree of life and the tree of knowledge reveal God’s presence at the very centre of life. I imagine Adam and Eve coming every day to the middle of the garden to eat the fruit of life, this amazing reminder of God’s love and generosity, free for the taking. Every time,

they would also pass the forbidden tree of knowledge, and that would remind them of their limits – that they are not God. Together, the trees remind them who God is, and who they are. When we are tempted, we must remember that God is with us right in the middle. Forgotten or ignored, perhaps, but always present, always gracious, right in the centre of our being.

The serpent's trick for deceiving Eve is to draw her attention to the one tree and not to the other. And isn't that just how temptation works in our own lives? We forget about all the things we already have to enjoy; instead, the thing that we *don't* have becomes the one thing that will make us complete. That's what the snake does. "Never mind the fruit of life that's right over there, free for the taking, look at this *other* tree that you're not allowed to eat from. The knowledge of good and evil...if you had that kind of knowledge, you would be like God." And of course, that's where the snake really shows his stripes, because now he's not telling the whole truth. He says that *knowledge* is what makes God, God. As if by knowing everything there is to know, then you will be a god. Many people seem to believe that, but it's not true. If that were true, then we should all be worshipping AI – those big artificial intelligence models that are so rapidly learning everything there is to know. ChatGPT, Grok, and Gemini: "Behold your gods, O Israel!"

But God is more than knowledge. God is *love*, and Eve should have remembered that. Knowledge without love would be nothing but brute force – something demonic. Knowledge is power, but our God is more than sheer power – our God is not a one-tree God. God is not just a tree of knowledge, God is also a tree of eternal life – a tree *for others*, a tree for us of grace and generosity, with ripe fruits hanging there to be taken. God is wisdom and power, certainly. But God is also love and grace. Eve should have remembered that other tree growing right beside them, all the while they talked.

As for us, knowledge is a worthy goal; we should always keep learning, stay curious, keep discovering more about this amazing world. But knowledge on its own is no good; it's worthless at best and destructive at worst. "If I...understand all mysteries and all knowledge...but do not have love, I am nothing," says the Apostle Paul. But when knowledge is grounded in love, it's worth a great deal.

It seems that the way we acquire and use knowledge is changing very quickly these days, especially with the rise of AI. The desire to have all information – and to have it *instantly* – is one of the great temptations in our world today. As the Church, we have a very important calling; to remind the world that knowledge is not the only tree in the garden. We are to show the world how knowledge can be grounded in love. To have all knowledge will not make us gods. It's love that makes us holy.