

February 22, 2026—The First Sunday in Lent
The Rev. James Wyatt

The Disobedience of One

What, exactly, did Adam and Eve do wrong?

That might be the most loaded question I've ever started a sermon with. It's loaded because there's an obvious answer which I do not like, and the path to a better answer is not easy and involves unlearning a lot about what we think we know about the second and third chapters of Genesis. And maybe you are perfectly content with the obvious answer, but I invite you to join me on this journey anyway and see where we end up.

So the obvious answer is, of course, that Adam and Eve sinned by disobeying the clear commandment of God. God told them they could eat the fruit of every tree in the garden of Eden, except the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. So what did they do? They ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They did exactly what God told them not to do and so God was angry and kicked them out of Eden. Right?

Well, like I said, I don't like the obvious answer. I don't like it because I'm not comfortable with a definition of sin that boils down to disobedience. I don't love the idea that God could make any arbitrary set of rules that God wanted to, and breaking those rules is wrong because they are the rules. I prefer to think about rules in sort of the opposite direction: I think God's law is a beautiful vision of who we are meant to be and the way we're meant to live together in community based on equality and mutual service. And disobeying God is wrong not because God demands our obedience like some kind of heavenly tyrant, but because it means failing to live up to who we are created to be.

So then, *why* did God forbid the humans God made from eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? How did that rule help us live into the glorious vision of who we were created to be? And why was it so important, that breaking that rule warranted such a strong response?

Well, to unpack that, like I said at the outset, it's helpful to forget everything we think we know about this story. Starting with the word "man" right there in the first verse we read today. Genesis chapter 2 tells us that God created the human—ha-adam—from the earth—ha-adamah. "The human from the humus," was how my Old Testament professor in seminary, Phyllis Trible, tried to translate the Hebrew wordplay. *Adam*, in Hebrew, isn't a personal name. It simply means person or human—as in "all humanity," not specifically a male person. So God took this human made from humus, this earth-creature of indeterminate sex and put them in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. Now, our reading this morning skips over the verses where God realizes that it's not good for this earth-creature to be alone, and so God tries to make a good partner for the human. And after creating all the animals of the world, God realized that the best partner for a human is another human, so God put the earth-creature to sleep and split them in two to make two humans—and now the Hebrew uses the words "man" and "woman," ish and ishshah. Now the earth-creatures are sexually differentiated.

And I take pains to spell all that out because men for centuries have tried to use this story to say that man is superior to woman because "he" was created first, and woman was created to be subordinate to man, and that's all based on pretty sloppy translation. The point is that these two humans were created to be partners and companions to each other.

And then this talking serpent comes along, one of the wild animals that God had made. Now, I don't know why the snake tried to get the humans to eat the forbidden fruit. And I don't really get why eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil made the man and the woman aware that they were naked and decide they needed to cover up. What I do know is that when God asked them what happened, they started pointing fingers. The man said, "*she* gave me the fruit," and the woman said, "the serpent tricked me." And instead of being the partners and companions that they were created to be for each other, instead of the mutuality and equality for which they were made, they were full of shame and blame.

I had a professor in college who referred to this story as “the fable of how the snake lost its legs,” which is a bit of an oversimplification, because it is also the fable of why childbirth is so painful and why agriculture is so difficult and why we die and return to the ground—“For out of it you were taken,” God says to the man, “you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” This story, fundamentally, is a recognition that we are not living up to everything we were created to be. It’s an assurance that God has better things in mind for us.

So then, what Paul does in his letter to the Romans, is he makes the case that yes, ever since those first humans did what they did we have not lived up to our created potential—and now Jesus, like a new, improved Adam, has opened up a better way for us. Just as Adam’s trespass led all of humanity down a road that leads to sin and death, so Jesus’ free gift leads us all along a new road that leads to righteousness and eternal life.

So that brings us, finally, to our Gospel reading on this first Sunday in Lent. This time, there’s no talking snake—Jesus is face to face with the Adversary, which is what “satan” means in Hebrew. And I would argue that the temptation or test that the Adversary presents to Jesus is not a question of obedience to God’s law—the devil isn’t trying to make Jesus do something that God has told him not to do. The test is a question of fidelity to his identity—the devil is hoping to make Jesus be someone that God never intended for him to be.

“If you are the Son of God,” the Adversary says, then use your power to benefit yourself—turn these stones into bread and feed yourself. If Jesus had done that, would he have been breaking God’s law? No, and we know that because later on in the Gospel story Jesus does miraculously produce bread to feed people, twice. Now, Jesus quotes Scripture to justify his refusal: “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” But again, Jesus isn’t citing a commandment that prohibits him from doing what the devil wants him to do—he’s expressing his own identity rooted in Scripture and grounded in the word of God. “This is who I am,” he says: “One who is sustained by the word of God.”

And then it’s like the Adversary gets the idea to start quoting Scripture because Jesus did—“Well how about *this* Scripture then? It is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you... On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” And again, look, five verses later we see angels come and minister to Jesus, so it’s not like it would be somehow disobedient for Jesus to ask for angelic intervention. But throwing himself from the pinnacle of the Temple so everyone could see angels come and bear him up? That is not who Jesus is. He is the Son of God, but he became truly human, which means living and dying like we do.

So the Adversary says, “OK, fine, you want to live like a human? I’ll make you the ruler of all the humans. Just bow down and worship me.” And yes, for sure, if Jesus had succumbed to this temptation he would have disobeyed a direct commandment of God, the first and greatest of the Ten Commandments. But he also would have forsaken everything that he was meant to do and to be. How could he proclaim the kingdom of God while he was ruling the kingdom of the devil? How could he lead us into the truth while he was serving the prince of lies?

Jesus overcame the temptation of the devil by remaining faithful to his identity and his vocation. And he invites us to do the same. He calls us together into this community, this kingdom built on equality and partnership. He invites us to remember who we are and who we were created to be: made in God’s own image, formed from the dust and given life from the very breath of God, creatures of inherent worth and dignity, free from shame and blame, made to be partners and helpers to each other. And he inspires us to live out that glorious vision of community and equality and respect, to shine as the light of the world, an example for others to follow.

Thanks be to God.