

Sermon for Sunday, March 9, 2014 (Lent I) Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 "Stupid Questions"

A few decades ago, when I was working in software engineering, I had a colleague named John. John was the master of what we might call the stupid question. Let me be clear: John was not a stupid person. But he was famous, or infamous, at staff meetings for offering a question that, on the face of it, seemed plain old dumb. Invariably, he posed one of these when we were going down a design track that was wrong. But John would never say we were wrong. He simply revealed our wrongness with a simple question which, when we answered it, made obvious that we were off in the hinterlands of wrong and our path would not take us to the desired solution.

I wonder if the serpent in our story is another master of the stupid question.

We're going to explore that serpent's stupid question and its aftermath because I believe that because of this story, for millennia, Eve has gotten a bad rap. She's portrayed either as a dumb bunny who is conned by a snake, or as a seductress who convinces her husband Adam to eat what they're not supposed to eat so they can have something they're not supposed to have. Something that God told them to stay away from, but something very, very attractive. She is then named as not only the mother of all humanity, but the first sinner. And in this season of Lent, when we are asked to reflect upon our own sins, we are often told that she is the prime sinner...her husband is merely a secondary player.

But it is more complicated than that, just as our stories of sin and redemption are more complicated than that. To make my case, let's look a little more closely at the text. There are some pieces missing in the story you heard in the reading from Genesis. We skip from God showing Adam the garden and issuing the first limiting instruction, that business about not eating from one of the trees, to the first transgression, the humans eating from that tree. That first limiting instruction is the first clue that we have that God is doing something interesting here – giving us the power to make a choice. To adhere to the instruction, or not...it's our choice. We also skip over the poetic tale of the creation of Eve in the wake of Adam's loneliness – after all, you can't have quite the same relationship with a cow or a platypus that you can have with another human partner – which stresses how humans are really different from the rest of God's creation. That creation, of course, that we have been told is all good. All is good. God said so. Remember that – we'll get back to that.

So after that skip, who's the first actor in this story? It's the serpent...and the first thing the storyteller shares is how crafty the serpent is. You'll note that the serpent is not described as evil. The serpent is crafty. Clever. A part of creation, and creation is all good, right? In a way, we might even look at the serpent as admirable in its wit and strategic thinking...and then, as if to reinforce that notion, the serpent speaks. Heretofore, Adam has only spoken the names of the animals and has spoken in affirming the gift of Eve, calling her "bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh," rightly saying that she is not a different creature, but intimately related to him. Animals haven't spoken in the story, until this moment, this serpent.

Now we have a dialogue between this crafty serpent and the woman. Eve. It seems like she is alone. They talk: the serpent says "did your creator say you can't eat from any of the trees?" Remember, Eve wasn't there when God gave the instruction about what's allowed and what's not allowed. Eve doesn't seem particularly surprised that a serpent is talking to her, but she does seem intent on correcting the serpent. After all, he's said something that is wrong. Earlier we have heard that God filled the Garden of Eden with "every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." And God had said they could eat of anything they wanted, EXCEPT for the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

So of course Eve wants to tell the serpent, that clever and crafty thing, that it is wrong. It is only one tree that is off-limits. But the interdiction is a strong one: not only is the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil off limits, if they disobey, they die. And she adds a detail – they are not only required to abstain from eating it, they can't even touch it. We don't know if that is what Adam told her, if she wants to more dramatically reinforce the point, or what, but she is pretty clear about what should happen.

The serpent proposes the seemingly stupid question "is it true you can't eat anything off of these gorgeous trees?" It's a stupid question because these humans have to eat SOMETHING, and the trees and the fruit on them are staring them both in the face. So she responds, "no, you dumb snake. Only one tree is forbidden."

The stupid question. It's an old strategy, of course, setting someone up by saying something incorrect. It puts the listener into the position of having superior knowledge, and inclines them to instruct the one who has posed the false statement. My friend John used it to show how we were wrong in systems design, but often the crafty person who has set up the dialogue can twist the so-called smart one into a knot with a counter statement.

How does it work? The poser of the stupid question may have started off making you feel superior by feeding you a statement you know is false, then you've proven him wrong, but when he can add additional facts that start off supporting your claim but lead you astray, you have been turned. There is now doubt in your mind about your own intelligence.

And the serpent was all about creating doubt in the mind of Eve. Because doubts so very often lead us to bad choices, and we have been given the ability to make choices by our creator. So the serpent continues its conversation with Eve. "Oh, THAT tree! Yes, I've heard about that tree. You're right, it has amazing power. But I'll let you in on a little secret, and I only know this because I was here on the earth a bit before you were and I heard this from a reliable source - you won't die."

Eve: "We won't die?" Serpent: "Nah. God only said that because he didn't want you to get the knowledge, because if you did, you'd be just like God."

Now Eve, who has been very proud of her knowledge of God's rules about the trees and the eating, is shaken. Did God lie to them about this, to keep all of the power? Did Adam give her bad information? Is she the only one who doesn't know? Her world, her perfect Eden with her perfect mate, is no longer so perfect. And that tree looks gorgeous. The fruit looks luscious. And if you get the added benefit of knowledge that would make you smart like God, what is the harm in it?

Now we get to the interesting part. Where has Adam been through all of this? Adam has been silent through all this business with the serpent. You would assume that Adam and Eve would be together all the time. They are, after all, the only humans around, and they are flesh of each others' flesh and bones of each others' bones. Did Eve wander off from Adam in the garden? Or was Adam there all along, just watching? Wouldn't he interrupt her when she corrects the serpent, and say "God didn't say we couldn't touch it. He just said we couldn't eat it?" Wouldn't he say, "Serpent, you're off base here. We've got a good deal and we're not going to mess it up?" But he says nothing. He simply sees his partner enjoying that fruit, and he decides he wants some, too.

Who's the dumb bunny now? He makes the same choice that Eve does. The same stupid choice, because the seed of doubt has been planted in both of them by that stupid question. And they eat, and they see something they hadn't seen before. They are naked. Whereas before it didn't matter if they were made in the image of God, now they see that they are only partially so. They are human. Their difference from God makes them feel separate and afraid. Knowledge does that sometimes. They have gotten what they ate the fruit for, and what they have gotten isn't at all what they expected.

Choice is at the heart of the problem for us. It would be so much easier if God had not made Adam and Eve like Godself...made in God's own image, including the intelligence to choose. It would be so much simpler if there hadn't been that tree and that serpent and that rule, all of which made Adam and Eve godlike in their ability to choose but not godlike in their ability to make the right choice. So they made the wrong choice. They did the one thing that God told them not to do. They sinned.

Here's the heart of sin: we have the ability to use our brains to make choices, but time and time again, we let our own desires get in the way of making the right choices. We tend to want to blame someone for our transgressions. It was the serpent. It was my spouse. It was the stupid boss. It was the stupid question. But the question was not what caused the sin. It was our choice. The very gift we received – the ability to choose – is sometimes our undoing.

It isn't Eve. It isn't that we are born wired to sin. No. We choose to do what is not what we are supposed to do. And that would be a mightily depressing situation except for one thing: God loves us. God loves us so much that we are forgiven. Forgiven over and over and over again. Sometimes we are punished for our bad choices, but we are always forgiven. Always.

In these weeks of Lent, we examine our lives and our hearts to see how we have been choosing. Have we been choosing in accordance with God's love, with the beautiful creation God has given us? Or have we been choosing as if all we hear are the stupid questions, the questions that whisper "Why shouldn't you be as smart as God? It doesn't cost God anything. Why shouldn't you take the lip gloss from the counter and slip it into your purse? The company builds in a certain amount of loss in their financial model. Why shouldn't you cheat on your spouse? Everybody else does it."

Stupid questions don't necessarily lead to stupid choices. My buddy John proved that to me. But if we do not use the intelligence that God gave us to sort out what's stupid and what's not, we will continue to go down this path of wrong choices, wrong and painful things that turn us from the God who loves us so much that he keeps forgiving us. But wouldn't it be better if God was not having to bail us out all the time? Think of the questions. Think of the choices. They are sometimes complicated. It may not always be evident what is the right path. But think of the love God shows to you, and the love you can give back to God, if you make the right choices. Pray for the wisdom to make them. Let this be the time you commit to that. Amen.