

# Knowing Good and Evil

TEXT: Genesis 3:1-24

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on August 20, 2023*

While the Bible isn't presented in chronological order, the first few chapters of Genesis are the Bible's oldest stories, likely shared in various forms orally for thousands of years before writing was even invented. They fit into a category of literature called origin stories, which have helped shape families, tribal groups, and nations around the globe from the beginning. That's their purpose—to articulate the values that are important to whichever family, tribe, or nation tells them and to instill those values in their people.

Stories are how cultures are built and maintained, which is why the push and pull of political factions in all places and times have largely been about which stories are taught in school and told through song and film, literature, pulpits, and the nightly news. Authoritarians decapitate storytellers first. To control a narrative is to control a people.

These origin stories from Genesis are not how things literally happened; they are not meant to be literal history. That's not the kind of stories they are. They are true, but not factual. They contain the truth of stories—the truths we try to pass on to our children when we read them bedtime stories—the truths about life and relationships and the joys and trials we will encounter during this journey called life.

The Bible does contain some factual information. There are geographic places you can find on a map and visit today. The Bible names people, empires, and events that are taught in actual history classes. But the point to remember is that the Bible was not written to teach us facts; it was written to teach us something from the much larger category of truth as each biblical author understood it.

If you find yourself in an argument with someone about whether something in the Bible actually happened or not, the truth has already left the building, *no matter which one of you is right*. The stories of the Bible are trying to point us to values and ideals much larger and much more important.

That is what Genesis 3 offers—truth about life seen through the lens of an ancient and great story. Seeing it as a literal account of the first man and woman has brought us no end of trouble. If you are like most people, you probably heard Laura read the curses God levies on Adam, Eve, and the snake and cringed; thinking that those verses justify misogyny, oppression, the shaming of sexuality, killing any and every snake, and showcase the cruelty of a capricious God.

And yes, if you take the story literally, you get all that; plus, if you sign up by midnight tonight, you get a bonus horrific doctrine called “Original Sin” that taints the soul of every person ever born and damns them to hell until Jesus comes; and even then you can't escape it until you say the magic words, while being physically tortured by church representatives, if that's what it takes. Obviously, I'm not a fan of that branch of Christian thought.

I am here to bring you the good news that there is another way to read this story, as well as the great news that Judaism has a millennia-long tradition of telling and retelling biblical stories from different perspectives in order to better get at the core truths that they teach. We don't have two different creation stories in the first two chapters of Genesis because one is right and one is wrong. We have them both because each is designed to show us a different aspect of the truth about God and the world. And that gives us permission to hold the stories up to the light of our own day and retell them in ways that can reveal even more about the God who made and loves us.

Such a retelling is what I'm going to do this morning, prefaced by some digging into a couple of the most important words in the text and noting some details. First, note that the snake is in the Garden before anybody eats any fruit. The snake exists because God created it along with everything else. It didn't sneak in from the realms of hell. Satan is nowhere mentioned or even implied in this story. The snake has just as much right to be there in the Garden of Eden as Adam and Eve do and is just as good as the rest of God's creation.

But using the word “crafty” to describe the snake at the outset of Genesis 3 does need some attention, since the word “crafty” in Hebrew is merely the past participle of another key word in the story and you would never be able to figure that out in any English translation. The primitive, original root word from which “crafty” is derived

is the word for “naked,” to make bare, to be uncovered. Crafty is the past participle of that verb—the completed action—literally, the cover-up. Why is that important?

Pop quiz. Did the original manuscripts of the Bible have chapter and verse numbers? No! Archbishop of Canterbury Stephen Langton added chapters and verses in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The very last verse of chapter 2 says, “And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.” It’s just a few words later that our uncovered heroes meet a snake engaging in a crafty cover-up. And it’s not the last time the matter of being covered or uncovered comes up in this story.

But before we get there, we’ll need to bring in a look at the word for “knowledge.” Remember, we’re dealing with the tree of the *knowledge* of good and evil. While knowledge has been a head trip in Western culture at least since the Enlightenment, Genesis 4 begins with the sentence, “Now the man *knew* his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain.” Stephen Langton strikes again with a chapter break, but all of it is connected. One more thing to put them together.

The word for “crafty” can be translated as “subtle” and “cunning,” but also as “prudent” and “sensible,” especially in the book of Proverbs. What connects the meanings when seen in context is that the word always has that sense of being covered. Listen to these verses from Proverbs which translate the word for “crafty” in Genesis 3 with more positive words like “prudent” and “clever.”

Proverbs 12:16, “A fool’s wrath is presently known: but a prudent man covers shame.”

Proverbs 12:23, “One who is clever conceals knowledge, but the mind of a fool broadcasts folly.”

Proverbs 13:16, “Every prudent man deals with knowledge; but a fool lays open his folly.”

Proverbs 22:3, “The clever see danger and hide; but the simple go on, and suffer for it.”

There are more, but did you hear how the word for prudent and clever—which is the exact same word as crafty in Genesis 3:1—involves covering up? Hiding? Hiding like Adam and Eve do once they’ve eaten the fruit?

The ones who have knowledge in Proverbs are the ones who don’t show their hand. The ones that are able to sense danger and hide. The ones who take cover and protect themselves. Those without knowledge “lay open” their folly. And the word for knowledge in those verses from Proverbs...is it the same as the description of the tree of knowledge in Genesis? Why yes; yes it is. And also the same word as Genesis 4:1 when Adam *knew* his wife, Eve, and they conceived a son as a result.

The craftiness of the snake is in not disclosing everything he knows. He covers himself. He tells the truth, but not the whole truth. Adam and Eve were naked—uncovered, unknowing and therefore vulnerable. But the minute they eat the fruit they run for cover and hide until verse 20 when God finally gives them clothes—a covering—to send them out of the Garden with some protection into a harsh world.

Knowledge in the Bible is not just an intellectual exercise. It’s not memorizing information. To know something or someone is an intimate experience that produces offspring. That is to say, it has consequences. Intellectual knowledge is just information. You don’t actually know it, in the biblical sense, until you have tested that information in the fires of real life and have experienced the effects of the way you used it.

But that can be dangerous, so the wise take care that they are not vulnerable—that they are covered up—except with those they trust deeply. To engage the world naked—without protection—is folly according to Proverbs, because the truth is that life is hard and dangerous. When we learn that lesson, as Adam and Eve do, we learn to put on a coat to face the winter storms.

So, to go back to the tree, choosing to *know* good and evil by eating the fruit is not choosing to expand your thought to intellectually understand new concepts. It’s choosing to expand your experience. We may look at the Garden of Eden as Paradise—perfection. The ultimate good. But “good” has no meaning until you have experienced something that is definitely “not good.” You can’t experience goodness and know that it’s good, if you don’t have anything bad to contrast it with. We only understand darkness when the lights go out.

Those who told this story are telling us that Adam and Eve (and maybe the snake, too) chose not just to understand, but to *experience* both good and evil. And that meant that the curses levied upon them are not God giving harsh punishment for their terrible sin of disobedience, but rather God giving them what they asked for: the actual experience of both good and evil, which is exactly the experience of the world as we know it.

Now that's a lot, even for me, so let's pull back and connect some dots with a story. What might we learn if the Adam and Eve story went something like this:

When God finished creating all that is and saw how wonderfully good it all was, God looked on Adam of the red earth and on Eve, the mother of all living. And God thought, "I have given them my own image. They have my own boundless capacity to give and receive love. They have my delight, curiosity, and desire to create worlds. But I also gave them my freedom. Love would not be love if it were not freely chosen."

God paced back and forth across the arc of the heavens. "Oh, but what if one or both of them were to make a different choice? Suppose they don't choose love? That could set off a cascade of choices that could destroy the harmony of all life that I intended at the birth of the world." A turtle wandered by, and God remembered how clever it was to put the turtle's home on its own back.

God thought, "I must find a way to guard the innocence of this man and woman, as they learn to serve and protect the earth and each other. I'll put them in a perfect garden home, sealed off from any danger. In the Garden they can experience the joy and goodness I have given to them and to every living thing. I'll walk with them in the Garden so that they come to know and understand me and my heart, even as they learn how to deeply love and serve each other, the earth, and all that I have created.

"I can't force them to stay or prevent their choices, or their love will never be real. But I can warn them that there are perils outside of the Garden that I hope they never have to experience. I can tell them that what they are experiencing now is very good, but warn them not to desire the experience of evil. Such knowledge would, in time, kill them and everything else I have made."

So, God warned Adam of the red earth about the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and told him to stay away from its fruit or death would come. And Adam passed the warning to Eve, the mother of all living. But still God worried, because God knew that they still had a choice. "They are so innocent," thought God. "They are protected here in the Garden from what they don't know. But that is their only covering.

"I have given all the animals fur and feathers, scales and hides to protect them, since sometimes *they* roam past the Garden's edge. But the humans are protected only by the Garden itself. As long as they choose to serve and protect it; it will serve and protect them in return. They live naked within it, free from fear, protected in their vulnerability for as long as they so choose. But if they choose to experience both good and evil...oh, I so hope they don't." And God set about making more squirrels to distract them from the tree.

But the serpent was one of those creatures who had been curious enough to venture beyond the Garden's edge, following the cats out once at dusk. With his scales, earthy colors, and quick movement low to the ground, he was protected; but he saw things that frightened him. Quickly returning to the Garden, the serpent thought to himself, "If what I have seen out there should ever come in here, it will be terrible. We will not survive. The humans care for all of us. They should know what it's really like so they'll be better able to protect us.

"God knows what's out there; and all of us were there the day God announced that the humans would be made in God's own image. It makes no sense that they should not know. They need to understand, just as God does, or we could all be lost." And the serpent became convinced that saving all of them depended on the humans knowing what God knew so that they could be truly wise stewards of the world.

The serpent felt strong; but trembled just the same as he approached Eve, the mother of all living, which included him. The serpent reminded Eve of what he and every other creature had heard—that she and Adam of the red earth were made in God's own image, to serve and protect the whole world, just as if they were God in the flesh. How could they do that if they didn't know what God knew and what even he knew as a mere serpent? How could they protect the earth from evil if they had never experienced what it was? "Will you not eat and help us?" the serpent asked at last. "You're our mother."

Eve had never considered all that, and neither had Adam; but they knew God was counting on them to be good stewards of the world, and the serpent made perfect sense. And so, they ate of the tree, despite all the warnings God had given them.

God's heart felt a sudden pain and God rushed into the garden to look for Adam and Eve. But they were hidden, covered up by a large bush, bursting with golden flowers. God called to them and asked, "Why are you hiding?"

"Because we're naked!" said Adam, as if God should have known all along. Look at this skin—it's no protection at all!" And God knew then that the worst had happened. God said to Adam of the red earth, "You have known only good and abundance and plenty. You live at peace with every living thing. How did you know there was anything that could harm you? Did you eat of the fruit I warned you about?" Adam spit out a seed.

"She made me do it!" said Adam, as if Eve were not of his flesh and bone.

"It all started with the snake!" said Eve, as if she were not the mother of all living.

God let out a sigh that was deeper and longer than any sound that had ever been made in the world. God's sigh pierced every leaf, sending each one falling like a blanket on the red earth throughout the Garden, just as the serpent had seen happen that one dusky evening in the world outside. He blinked his beady eyes in disbelief, but said nothing, trying to make himself as small as possible, crawling along on the ground.

It had to happen at some point; but God wished they could have been protected for just a little longer; that they could have spent more time in the safety of the Garden; that they might have had more time getting to really know and understand what made the Garden good before their inevitable knowledge of the evil that also existed in the world.

But they chose to know now; to experience the nature of evil now. There was no going back. The fruit could not be uneaten. They could not unsee what they had seen or unknow what they had learned. So, God told them, sadly, but in no uncertain terms, what they had chosen to experience—the places where the soil would produce food only with great and exhausting effort; of the plants that were not good to eat or beautiful to behold that would easily puncture human skin or poison the human body.

God showed them a tribe full of strife and war that would not view men and women as equal, but would put women under the rule of men who they needed but who could not know and would not respect what the women knew of the pain and danger of childbearing. A world where the serpent, too, would not have a safe Garden to crawl back to and where all the things the serpent had first feared would come to pass. The humans would never trust him again. They might not even protect him, even though it was their job.

God's heart was breaking for all of them and knew Adam and Eve could not face what was ahead by always hiding in the bushes, many of which were already sprouting thorns in case the man and the woman could no longer protect them either. So, God dressed Adam of the red earth and Eve, the mother of all living in protective hides, taken from a pair of cattle who had already perished of thirst without the rivers of the Garden.

God also knew that the most merciful thing that could be done for the man and the woman now was to make sure that the pain of knowing evil would have an end. The tree of life—the fruit that would have given them immortality in the Garden—was placed beyond their reach. Adam, Eve, their children, and all those who came after would return to the ground that God first used to shape them. They chose to know it all; and that meant death as well as life.

And, just like every parent who has ever watched a child leave the bubble of home for the difficult journey of life, God cried, causing a great and blinding rain to fall upon the earth. The Garden was washed away, the Tree of life disappeared under an angel's wings. And when the clouds blew away, Adam and Eve were covered, but alone.

The perfect Garden became a memory of what was, but not only that. It also became the hope of what could be again, if they woke up each morning and chose good over evil, wisdom over folly. It would be much harder, surely, but if they chose each day to serve and protect the earth and taught those things to their children, maybe they could bring the memory of the Garden back to life again. Because wow...the world outside the Garden needed so much more protection and help than they could have ever imagined.

Eve glanced around for the snake, but saw only the tip of a tail sliding off into the tall weeds. She reached out for Adam. And Adam knew his wife, Eve, and they conceived and bore a son. They named him Cain. And Eve worried about how she would protect her son and what might happen if he did not choose wisely as he grew.

Amen.