

WESTMINSTER
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SERMON

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SEEKING:
Who will you listen to?

Dr. Jo Forrest

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Organizational guru and Wharton professor, Adam Grant, spoke with Becky Kennedy on a recent podcast. Dr. Kennedy is a clinical psychologist and founder of Good Inside: a global parenting community. Some know of her as Dr. Becky on Instagram. She's been called the "Millennial Parenting Whisperer" for helping millions of parents think differently.

Their conversation captivated me as they spoke about how to bring out the best in people, particularly kids. Many of their insights into values and behavior apply to faith and our Lenten sermon series this year.

They focused on the questions parents ask their kid's and how a more finely tuned, "how was your day" inquiry can powerfully shape character.

Grant began by describing a frequent dinner-table question in his home, "who helped you today?" He and his wife want their kids to notice what other kids did that was kind and helpful, versus the popular kids. Who did you see help someone? What happened next? What did they think of the kids?

From the richness of their conversation Dr. Becky responded with audible tears, choking as she said, “the questions you ask someone tells them the road you want them to walk.” Asking, “who helped you today,” tunes a kid’s capacity to see empathy and compassion, among other traits, and perhaps offer themselves as a helper.

Day after day, these types of questions from parents anchor those values within them. Kennedy claims kids will return to them as they mature, holding themselves to these standards.¹

Questions. This Lent, the lectionary passages from scripture we will read in worship contain questions, life shaping questions. Since they come from scripture, let’s consider them divine, parental questions, the kind we never outgrow.

Over the coming weeks, we’ll explore more questions asked by God, Jesus, and by people just like you and me from long ago.

¹“Bringing out the good in kids—and parents—with Becky Kennedy,” TED, February 14, 2023, <https://www.ted.com/podcasts/rethinking-with-adam-grant/bringing-out-the-good-in-kids-and-parents-with-becky-kennedy-transcript?fbclid=IwAR150xil9RZtaKBZVEZzmnjRkQIr7zqRp2HsNILKVO3v12izZbj0rrBLHfw>

When we hear the stories, we also question what we've been told about the stories versus what we hear. In our Reformed Presbyterian faith, we believe that the Holy Spirit inspires fresh meaning when we read scripture in community.

Today's reading appears in the first book of scripture, Genesis, shortly after God created the human, in God's own image, and called us very good. Humanity begins in blessing. We start out on an absolutely positive and hopeful foundation, which cannot be overstated.

You may think you know this familiar story of what comes next.

Throughout the ages people interpreted it to be a curse or used it as a weapon.

Listen with fresh ears and an open mind. Pay attention to the questions. And, in keeping with our Reformed faith to trust the holy spirit to guide us, please pray with me.

Holy God,

Listening is always easier said than done.

We shuffle into this space and try to quiet our minds, but the list of distractions is long. We need your help to listen. So today we ask that you would stir our souls awake. Open our hearts to make room for you, amen.

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-9

The LORD God put the human 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."

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the

trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'

But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you 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 husband, 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.

They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?”

Did you hear it? The very first question in this story, and the first question asked in all of scripture, comes from the serpent. Rabbinic literature considers the serpent a “creature of unending mystery.”²

When the slithery beast asks, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" it calls into question the goodness of God.

He encourages the woman to wonder, why be denied something that could taste and feel good. As if to say, “focus on yourself and your desires. You can choose.”

Further, this common reptile calls God a liar by assuring her, “no you’re not going to die” and encourages the woman to dismiss the consequences of her actions. And, if we trust the text, the snake is right. They do not die that day.

² Danielle Shroyer, *Original Blessing* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016). Shroyer’s books and commentaries from *A Sanctified Art* influence the series and exegesis of this simple story.

This story resonates through the ages in art and folklore because it is good literature; the serpent's question stands as the inciting incident, a literary device needed for all stories to move along from crisis, to climax, and a resolution. That continues for centuries and through many books, gospels, letters, prophecies, until today.

A simple question sparks the woman's curiosity.

What did you *not* hear?

Over the centuries, people point to this story in terms of humanity's fall from grace, the stain of origin of sin, and condemnation of death. Yet, the word "sin" never appears, nor any of its synonyms. As you continue in the Hebrew Bible, this man and woman are never mentioned again in the story of Israel's rise and Judaism's faith. Ancient writers had no concept of humanity's fall. Even today, rabbinic commentators interpret this story as the rise of human consciousness.³

³ Scott Hotzee, Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 Sermon Commentary, *Center for Excellence in Preaching*, February 26, 2023, Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 - Center for Excellence in Preaching (cepreaching.org)

In Christianity, it was not until the fourth century when church fathers coined the term “original sin,” to contrast humanity’s disobedience against Christ’s obedience. Sure, the story proves we are not God or god-like, and later we see that we fall far short of Christ’s perfection.

Later theologians challenged the doctrine as a foil, conceived to keep us in line with the church’s ability to control grace and forgiveness. And yet, this doctrine hangs over us, telling us how bad we are, and vengeful God is.

Now that I’ve proposed some things this story doesn’t say, what does it offer?

Rather than asking this story to be the first and sole statement about humanity, we could read it as what it is; a story from scripture, holy and with authority, to provoke us to consider what is true about ourselves and, to whose voice we listen.

It’s vignette, a showcase window if you will, of the way life goes.

This story tells a truth about the choices we face as we live in this creation. Life begins in blessing and harmony. An ordinary snake, part of God's created order, with no vested interest in our welfare, disrupts our notion of how to live. And when humans acquired the freedom to choose, to make deliberate choices, we don't often choose well.

Growing up is anything but easy. We can feel so foolish when we realize just how complex the world is. We feel naked and vulnerable, aware of how much is beyond our comprehension. We see evil. We know evil is a shattering experience. Even worse when we begin to see how others or even ourselves are capable of evil, whether it begins from an innocent offense or is pre-meditated.

The woman desired the fruit, a metaphor for the ability to distinguish between good and evil. That's where the snake deceived her, she has no capacity to ever taste the full extent of those end points, good and evil, along a long continuum. We can never acquire the full knowledge to understand the consequences of choosing between seemingly innocent

alternatives that seem good, what should seem obvious between good and evil, or the lesser of two evils.

All we know is that our choices are laden with outcomes that may become apparent now or at a later time when the divide opens in painful and uncorrectable ways.

When they eat the fruit, they see that they are not like God. They feel the ground become unstable as suspicion displaces trust, when an independent spirit corrupts their belief that there is a God who has our best interests at heart.

The man and the woman now fear God, with the word “fear” implying “feel awe.” They know just how human they are.

I hope you will begin lent by shedding any fears of God as a judgmental, condemning deity, and instead approach God with the awe of one who realizes that even when we disobey, God still seeks us.

The questions in this story challenge us to consider who do we listen to?

When someone asks about our lives, encourages us to do something we think is wrong, do they have our best interests in mind?

Let me close by returning to the story. The serpent asks the first question. Do you remember the first question God asks?

God asks the man, “where are you”?

Someone once asked a Jewish rabbi why God had to call out to the man, “where are you?”

“Didn’t God know where he was?”

“Oh yes, God knew,” the rabbi replied, “it was the man who didn’t know where he was. Nor do a lot of us most of the time.”⁴

The man and woman leave the garden, but never leave God’s care.

⁴ Hotzee, *Commentary*.

This Lent, ask yourself,

What voices are helpful in your life right now?

Who inspires your faith?

Whose voices are represented in your social media feeds or your news sources?

Whose voices are you missing?

In what ways can you listen to God?



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