

# Naked Truth

a sermon based on

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

and delivered on

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1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent (Year A)

at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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Did you notice the similarities between the Bible passages that we just heard? In the Gospel lesson the “tempter” – in this case, the devil – say’s to Jesus, (because he knows Jesus is hungry) “If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into loaves of bread.” (Mt 4:3) The tempter says to Jesus, “If you are the Son of God (prove it!) throw yourself from the top of the temple so that angels will swoop down to save you.” (Mt. 4:6) Again the tempter says to Jesus, “I’ll tell you what. I can make this all SOOOO easy for you. Bow down before me, I won’t even put up a fight, you can have all the kingdoms of the world,” (Mt 4:9) Mark and Luke tell it a little bit differently. Mark is a wee bit succinct in his description. He says, (and I’m about to read the whole description “He (that is Jesus) was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan.” (Mk 1:13a) Luke changes the order a bit – stones, kingdoms, temple but he also adds a little bit to that invitation to bow down and receive the kingdoms of the world saying, “Because you know who they really belong to. Right?” Actually the text says, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please.” (Lk 4:6b) You might have even “heard” that as I read from Matthew a moment ago, but only because you “know” that that line belongs there. We do that sometimes with Scripture. We hear what we expect to hear. Maybe, we read in – or hear things – that it doesn’t really say.

For just second, let’s think about that line from Luke when Satan says, “I will give...all this authority, for it has been given over to me.” Got it? Thinking about it? Who gave the authority over to him? Was it God? That’s an easy read, but that’s not what he says. He says, “It has been given over to me.” He never says, by whom. Bear with me, here.

In the early passage we heard from, today, Genesis – the story that we know as The Fall, what happens? The man and the woman are living in paradise! They’re completely unencumbered by worry. They don’t have to think about what to eat. “The Lord God said, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, but one.’” (Ge 2:16b-17a) Right? So, they don’t have to worry about what they’ll eat or drink. They don’t have to worry about what they’ll wear, because they get to be naked. Why don’t they have to worry? Because God has taken care of every single need. Think about that the next time, you read Matthew 6:25-30 when Jesus says, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?” God made them in his image, “Male and female he created them.” (Ge 1:27) Unlike everything else that he’d created and said, “It is good,” he looked at these nudists and said, “It is very good.” That’s the naked truth.

Some of you are probably getting a little nervous right now, wondering how far I’m going to take this. Right? I could make a crack about being naked under my robe? But I won’t, except I just did. Hmmm. I am naked under here. Every one of us is naked under our clothes. It makes sense to wear clothes in Illinois on the first of March. But why does the idea of even mentioning nakedness – especially in church get us nervous? Really? God didn’t seem to have a problem with it. So how did we get here?

Well, let’s go back to the Bible? The serpent – the tempter – (Remember how I asked in the beginning if you noticed how these two passages were similar? There’s a tempter. In Matthew it was the devil; here it’s a serpent) he’s crafty, the Bible says, “more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made.” (Ge 2:3) He suggests to the woman that she’s missing out. “Look at that tree. That fruit looks like something you’d really enjoy. Why don’t you ever eat any of it? Those dates and walnuts must get pretty boring. There’s only so much granola anyone can take.”

“It does look pretty good. Smells good, too. Every thing God made is good. He even said so.” I can imagine her stroking it as she said, “God said not to eat this fruit or even touch it or we’d die.” Except if we go back to Genesis 1:2, God never said not to touch it. But now she’s convincing herself, “I’m touching it. I’m still alive. It feels SOOO good. It looks SOOO good. It smells SOOO good. And the serpent here tells me it will make me be like God, and he is the smartest of all the wild animals. Maybe just one bite? Who am I kidding, if I die it’ll be just one bite, but that’s not going to happen. So she chomps into. Juice running down her chin and that same deranged look Homer Simpson gets thinking about donuts.”

Before we start blaming it all on the woman here, we need to remember that it says, “(S)he also gave it to her husband ***who was with her***, and he ate.” (Ge. 3:6b) All of a sudden, the man and the woman realize that their naked and they grab some fig leaves and made loin cloths.

We didn’t read it today, but the story goes on to tell how the man and woman hid from God, ironically and this is the naked truth because they were ashamed of being naked, even though they’d already made some clothes out of the fig leaves. God’s response is telling. “Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat from that tree, after I told you not to?” The man says, “This woman you gave to be with me, she gave it to me and it would have hurt her feelings to turn her down.” The woman says, “The serpent tricked me.” But here’s the naked truth. The serpent didn’t trick her.

Now wait a minute pastor. What Bible are you reading from? Didn’t we just hear it? Did we? We heard the serpent ask the woman why she hadn’t eaten from the tree. We heard the serpent suggest that it would make her be like a god. But as Ephraim of Syria pointed out way back in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, just because the serpent was wiser than all the beasts did not make him wiser than human being.<sup>1</sup> The serpent couldn’t trick the woman unless SHE gave him authority to dos. Look at the man – he knew that the serpent didn’t have power to trick him, but he let the woman play along, just to be sure she didn’t keel over before he took a go.

God didn’t give the devil authority over the kingdoms of earth any more than he gave the serpent authority over the man and woman in the garden. People did. We did. We do. We willing look to others for an excuse, like the convicts in a New Yorker cartoon sitting in a prison cell as one says to the other, “All along I though our level of corruption fell well within community standards.”<sup>2</sup> Who sets those community standards?

The naked truth is this, God made us free to be perfect. That’s HIS standard. Even when he tells us not to do things that seem pleasurable and appealing – things that might even meet our community standards, he’s offering us the freedom that no other creature enjoys. “Freedom does not mean the absence of constraints,” as Colin Campbell said describing the freedom that a skydiver has to choose whether or not to wear a parachute. She’s free to jump out of that plain with no parachute and even as naked as jaybird. But what will that get her?<sup>3</sup>

The naked truth is that God had blessed humanity with perfect freedom – absolute freedom. The freedom was absolute. He didn’t hide the tree. He didn’t put up a barrier. He just told them “No. And that it would lead to their death.” But they didn’t die. Right? Well? Consider this.

What happened when they were kicked out of paradise? They put on clothes. Right? So before when they were able to live without worry about what to eat or what to wear – when their

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Louth and Marco Conti, eds., *Genesis 1-11*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 1 (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2001) 74.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.art.com/products/p15063820596-sa-i6858146/bernard-schoenbaum-all-along-i-thought-our-level-of-corruption-fell-well-within-community-st-new-yorker-cartoon.htm> (accessed February 29, 2020)

<sup>3</sup> Edward K Rowell, *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: From Leadership Journal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000) 81.

skin was able to soak up sunshine and produce vitamin D, they were happy. Do you know that vitamin D deficiency can lead to depression? It was demonstrated in a study by the National Institute of Health back in 2010.<sup>4</sup> Vitamin D deficiency causes cardiovascular disease, cognitive impairment, bone loss, diabetes, fatigue cancer, Rickets, obesity. The list goes on.<sup>5</sup>

Sort of gives all new meaning to how often the cover up does more damage than the crime.

God gave people absolute freedom. Freedom from hunger, and fear of what another might see. He wants us to know that freedom again. That's the naked truth. But most of us aren't quite there yet. So for the love of God, keep your clothes on if only because I don't need to see that right now. But let's strip away shame. Jesus knew we were sinners. He knows we ARE sinners. He knew what it was like to be tempted. But he also knew the power of perfect freedom, the freedom that says: I choose to listen to God, because he knows best. He knew the freedom that says all the promises for immediate gratification, all the promises of saying I can prove God's love (in the passage today by jumping off the temple), all the promise of having claiming authority, I already have that – you already have that – each of us already has that authority to say I choose the freedom God gives me to follow him. In Hebrews 5:7-9 we hear, “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”

We have been blessed by a God who not gave us perfect freedom, but who has removed the shame of our failures and sins by the obedience and death on the cross of his Son, Jesus Christ, an atonement that says we don't have to hide or cover up, but only to be *at one* with the one who made us. Bare your soul and claim the naked truth. AMEN

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<sup>4</sup> Susan Penckofer, Joanne Kouba, Mary Byrn, and Carol Estwing Ferrans, “Vitamin D and Depression: Where is all the Sunshine?” *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 31, no. 6 (June 2010): 385-393.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2908269/> (accessed February 29, 2020)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.webmd.com/diet/guide/vitamin-d-deficiency#1> (accessed February 29, 2020)