

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV
Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: February 26, 2023 Year A First Sunday in Lent

Text: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7, Matthew 4:1-11

Title: To whom will you listen? (Sanctified Art)

Focus: The reading from Genesis, which describes the serpent as more “crafty” than any other wild animal, has been used in such a way that harms relationships and unfairly blames women. In the reading from Matthew, the devil/tempter attempts to deceive Jesus through use of Scripture. Even voices speaking Scripture and speaking within the church can be harmful. To whom shall we listen? What are principles that are helpful in listening to God’s voice within scripture?

Hard questions: Is it possible that the church can be harmful? Is it possible that Scripture can be harmful?

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

¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but 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.”

^{3:1} 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’?” ²The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³but 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.’” ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

⁶So 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. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Gospel Reading: Matthew 4:1-11

¹Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” ⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a

stone.”⁷ Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor;⁹ and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”¹⁰ Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

The Sanctified Art theme: “Seeking: honest questions for deeper faith”

Many of us gathered on this past Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, as the season of Lent began. Throughout the season of Lent, we at Good Shepherd are once again using resources from *Sanctified Art* to guide and inspire us. Among them are

- Devotional booklets presenting scripture with art and stories and questions for reflection. The Women’s Bible study is using these for group discussion as well.
- Video in worship, as you saw today
- Words for worship, as in our Call to Worship and Prayer of Confession.
- Commentary and reflections which inform my own reading and thinking as I prepare sermons on the texts

Using the designated scripture readings from the Lectionary, the pastors, writers, and artists from *Sanctified Art* noted how many of these stories featured people wanting or seeking greater clarity or meaning. They were willing to ask questions and consider something new.

These observations about the readings led the Sanctified Art folks to develop the theme **“Seeking: honest questions for deeper faith.”**

Here’s their intent; here’s what they hope happens or how they hope we’ll respond:

- “This Lent, we invite you to engage in the spiritual practice of seeking.”
- “We encourage you to stay curious, open, and nimble. We hope you will soften your assumptions and expand your perspectives.”
- “We pray that these questions will create a safe place to explore—to be drawn more deeply in the fullness of life, into the heart of God.”

Asking Questions

So, the practice or habit at the heart of this theme is *asking questions*. How does that sound to you?

On the one hand, I can see that being stimulating, invigorating. Isn’t asking questions and exploring and pondering something the very best way to learn, whether

we're a student in a classroom or a dog sniffing around a new place or an adventure-seeker on a new path?

On the other hand, I can see that—asking questions--potentially being scary if it's something we're not used to doing for whatever reason.

How comfortable are you with “asking questions?” Does that feel a bit scary—like doing so is questioning the things you have come to count on. Maybe it feels disrespectful of the one of whom you're asking questions. That *can* be scary—perhaps if you grew up with a different model. Maybe you grew up in school or home or church settings in which the unspoken message was that it's *not* okay to ask questions. Maybe you grew up accustomed to a model which said,

- “Here's what you need to know.”
- “Here's what's right and here's what's wrong.”
- “Do this. Don't do that.”

There can be comfort in that. There can be comfort in someone else telling us something like

- “Here's the way that it is” or
- “Here's where you want to go and here are the three steps you need to take,” as though it's that clear, that predictable, and that simple.

Asking Questions . . .

Not asking questions might be equated with comfort or security or not trying something new. Asking questions and taking risks can be scary. Scary, but we can also recognize the benefit. . .

Like the folks at *Sanctified Art*, we too can observe that Jesus asked questions all the time. . . He frequently answered a question with a question, particularly when people were trying to trap him by posing a question that had “no right answer.” He recognized the trap and posed a question in response.

Besides the intention of the *Sanctified Art* resources and theme, we at Good Shepherd also encourage this orientation to asking questions. In our Welcome Statement, one of the things we say is “**Welcome** to believers, questioners, and questioning believers.”

These examples reinforce the idea that growth in faith is nurtured by asking questions.

Asking Questions of Faith and of these Texts

So, with this proposition that asking hard questions can be a bit scary, but rewarding when we seek the truth behind them, let's jump into these two texts from Genesis and Matthew.

- The reading from Genesis tells of the “crafty” serpent deceiving Adam and Eve.
- In the reading from Matthew, Jesus has been in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights and is famished. He is tempted by the one who is alternately called “the devil” (v. 1) and “the tempter” (v. 3).

With temptation and deception as the commonality of the two texts, the Sanctified Arts folks ask “To whom will you listen?” as the focus question.

I want to ask another couple of questions. These questions fit with what we have said—that questions can be unsettling and we may resist raising them, but contemplating them and seeking honest responses can deepen our faith. Pastor Lauren Wright Pittman, one of the partners at *Sanctified Art*, describes asking questions and seeking responses as a process toward “a more authentic, rooted faith.”¹ That's our intent in asking hard questions.

To the question “To whom will you listen?” I want to respond with the following questions:

- Is it possible that the Church can be harmful?
- Is it possible that Scripture can be harmful?

I acknowledge that those are unsettling questions. But if this theme of seeking and asking questions and trusting God enough to ask hard questions is to be taken seriously (Pastor Lauren, who I just mentioned, calls that process “raw and honest”), then to fully engage in that process, we have to deal with our discomfort in asking unsettling questions.

- Is it possible that the Church can be harmful?
- Is it possible that Scripture can be harmful?

I'm going to answer “Yes” to both those questions.

- Yes, the Church can harm people, despite what it may intend.
- Yes, Scripture can be used in harmful ways—for instance, to exclude and diminish and blame, as has occurred with this text from Genesis.

¹¹ From Sanctified Arts theme reflection by the Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman, p. 2 of sermon planning guide.

“To whom will you listen?” is a challenging question. We listen to these two stories, and they are likely stories that we have heard before and so we already have ideas about them. In particular, we are the inheritors of a history of interpretations of this text from Genesis that are flawed and harmful.

One dominant misinterpretation is that Eve is to blame for the whole thing. This interpretation goes something like this:

- In this second creation story, Adam was created first and Eve second. Some people conclude from that order that Adam was better, superior, and Eve was inherently the weaker sex. She is subordinate and inferior.
- As the weaker of the two, she therefore was susceptible to the snake’s deception.
- The serpent speaks only to Eve. Early Church fathers interpreted this as the woman is morally weaker than man and thus an easier prey. They concluded that the woman is simpleminded, gullible, untrustworthy.²
- Moreover, she tempted Adam. She’s to blame. She led her innocent husband astray. She is seductive and evil.

Here are the flaws to consider in this interpretation:

- Adam was created first and Eve second or last (Genesis 2:22) and that’s supposed to mean that Adam is superior?
 - But in Genesis chapter one, humankind is created after animals. These same interpreters never argue that humans are inferior to animals because they were created later (Genesis 1:27).
 - It’s just the opposite: they regard the final creative act in Genesis 1 as the pinnacle of Creation. The text says, for instance, that God declared humankind to be “very good” (Genesis 1:31).
 - If this later-is-better principle extrapolated from Genesis 1 were applied consistently, the creation of the woman in Genesis 2 would be seen as the crowning achievement.
- What about the serpent speaking only to Eve?
 - Early Church fathers interpreted this to mean that woman is morally weaker than man and thus an easier prey.
 - There’s nothing in the text to support this; it’s speculation. The text itself does not say *why* the serpent speaks to the woman. We could alternatively speculate instead that the serpent questions her because she is the more intelligent of the two. Is it because she is more independent?

² Pamela Milne, “Genesis from Eve’s Point of View” in the *Washington Post*. March 26, 1989. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1989/03/26/genesis-from-eves-point-of-view/dc371184-1f4c-4142-ac2d-d5efee72a0da/>

- Or it could be claimed that the man is silent, passive, bland and ruled by his belly. He thinks with his stomach and not his brain. I don't think the text directly blames him in that way, but that contrast shows you how historical interpretations about Eve and women are likewise not grounded in the text.
- Interpretations of this text have also been used to justify men's subordination of women. Others would counter that the text in Genesis 2 and 3 depicts male and female as equals. They are connected to each other. In Genesis 2:23, just a few verses after the first portion of our text:
 - ²³Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh;
- They are equal in responsibility and judgement. They share in shame and guilt and in redemption and grace. Both hide from God and both are punished.

Closing: Hard Questions. . .

It's not comfortable to acknowledge that traditional interpretations of chapters 2 and 3 of Genesis, a portion of which we read today, have been used to exclude and harm women.

As we think about the role of Scripture and how it can be used, it might be helpful to point out from the Matthew passage that the one alternately called the devil and the tempter (vv. 1 and 3) tried to get Jesus to do what he wanted using pieces of scripture:

- For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone (Psalm 91:11-12)

Scripture can be manipulated or misused, so we are challenged to listen well.

To whom will you listen? How will we discern God's voice amidst all the other voices?

We trust that God reveals God's self in Scripture, that God is intimately connected to humankind and is motivated by love. God is revealed most fully in the person of Jesus, who became "one of us and one with us."³

We trust that God's Holy Spirit will guide us to ask hard questions of scripture and help us understand what it means to us today.

May we continue in this Lenten journey of asking honest questions and seeking deeper faith.

³ Phrase used by Martin Marty in responding to the question, "What is the purpose of the Bible?" in his book *Lutheran Questions, Lutheran Answers*, pp. 25-26.