

“Take It from the Top”

Genesis 3:1-7

Luke 4:1-13

From the moment we first learn to speak we are filled with questions: Why is the sky blue? Why is the grass green? Why is my older brother so mean? Everything is a puzzle. We have to learn how to tie our own shoes, ride a bike and find our way home from school.

We need others to help us figure things out and find our way. Parents, teachers, and those who are older answer our questions. At first we were eager and quickly raised our hands when we didn't know the answer. We were curious then. We really did want to learn.

Someone told us once there is no such thing as a stupid question, and we believed that was true so we asked a lot of questions. Then one day the other kids laughed when we asked where babies come from. In that moment of embarrassing self-consciousness we resolved never to do that again. Better to be silent and appear to know the answer than to open our mouths and let others know we don't. We raised our hands less and less. Curiosity was extinguished. We settled on our answers to life's big questions - for a while at least.

But, down the road something happened, something we didn't expect, something that hits us out-of-the-blue. Cracks began to erode the foundation of our certainty. Suddenly we realized we didn't know as much as we thought we did. We began to ask questions again: Who am I? What kind of person do I want to be? Where am I going? Is that where I want to be? How do I get there? Perhaps the most important question is, “where will I find the answers to life's important questions? There are so many voices, how do I know which one to listen to?”

If you believe in God and if you believe God has spoken to us through his Word, then the answer to that question is clear. The Psalmist tells us clearly, “Thy Word is a lamp for our feet and a light for our path.” So, beginning this Sunday I am beginning a series of sermons, “God's Answers to Life's important questions.”

Each question will come from scripture itself beginning with the serpent's question to Eve, "Did God really say?" Before we look for an answer, let us look to God.

Let us pray:

Lord, we pray, speak in this place, in the calming of our minds and in the longing of our hearts, by the words of my lips and in the thoughts that we form. Speak, O Lord, for your servants listen. Amen.

Every culture and every religious tradition has a story that describes the beginning of the world. They try to answer the questions, "Where did we come from. "Why is the world the way it is?"

The book of Genesis has two creation stories. The first one in the first chapter focuses on the creation of the universe and our physical world. It is more interested in how stars and planets came to be and where whales and zebras came from? People don't show up until the sixth day.

The second creation story is found in the second chapter and it is all about humanity. We were formed, the Bible says, when God breathed into us the breath of life. Not only did we become living beings, but we became the focus of God's attention and care. A garden was created around us and for our benefit. We were given the blessing of Florida oranges and California grapes. We were given Kansas beef and Nebraska pheasants. Everything we needed was provided, including God's greatest blessing – freedom.

That's why God placed one tree in the middle of the garden with the only law of the land, "you shall not eat of this tree". With that tree we were given the freedom to choose. We were given the liberty to say "Yes" or to say "No". We did not have to function purely on instinct, but could now decide by thinking. We were given autonomy, independence and free will.

That's why the one whom the Bible describes as a serpent spoke to Eve instead of an elephant. That's why Eve spoke to Adam rather than an antelope. There was no point to that. We, more than any of God's other creatures can make

decisions on a higher plane. That can be a blessing or a curse depending on the decisions we make.

That's why the very first question in the Bible is that of the serpent to the woman, "Did God really say you shall not eat of any tree in the garden?" There are two ways to take this question. It can be a point of clarification. It is the student who raises a hand in class because he or she is really not following what the teacher is saying. It is a desire for understanding and the commitment to follow wherever the truth may lead. Asking questions about God's Word and Will is what my Search Bible study, and in fact every Bible study here, is all about. Every time you open God's Word or listen to a sermon you should be asking yourself, "What is God really saying here?" "What does it mean for me?"

There is another way to take that question "Did God really say?" It has nothing to do with finding an answer. It is not looking for truth. Rather, and my apologies to every attorney listening, this is a lawyer's question. It is an attempt to find a legal loophole around the law. It is scouring the fine print to find a way around the contract so that the insurance company doesn't have to pay. It is the difference between justice and the law.

When the serpent asked Eve, "Did God really say", he is inviting her to look for some wiggle room so that she can continue to receive the blessings of God while ignoring the responsibilities that come with them. The interesting thing about this temptation is that the serpent was trying to sell her something that she already has. He wants her to sell her soul for something she already has in her soul.

He says, "God knows when you eat of this forbidden tree you will become like God." The Bible already tells us that God created humanity in his own image. That's why freedom had to follow. God cannot be confined and anyone created in the image of God should live free. Eve and Adam and you and I have within us a divine spark, the breath of God, the *imago Dei*. That's why the echo of Eden clings to our souls and why we know deep down that the world is not as God intended and that we are not as God intended. That's where are dreams come

from. That's why we cling to hope. That's why injustice is so hard to take. No matter how hard and tarnished we become, no matter how pessimistic and hopeless we may feel, no matter how many times wrong seems to prevail over right, hatred over love, darkness over light, we still believe deep down in our souls that this is not the way it was supposed to be and this is not the way it will always be.

Eve was already like God because God created her to be that way, still she picked the fruit off that tree; she made her choice and suffered the consequence for her decision.

We do the same thing. We make our choices. Some of them are good and some of them are not. We try to decide rightly all the time because we've discovered that if you make your bed you have to lie in it. Even so, like Eve we choose poorly from time to time. Why?

When the serpent said, "Did God really say you shall not eat of any tree", Eve responded, "God said we shall not eat or touch it, lest we die." Both did something here that we are all prone to do. They took the Word of God and changed it, altered it, turned it, and even twisted it so that it no longer said what God said. That is easy to do.

Some, like that serpent, do it intentionally. The serpent knew that God forbade only one tree, but he turned it into every tree. If God forbade every tree then Adam and Eve would starve and that would make God a monster. So the serpent changed one word and tried to turn the word of God into a caricature so ridiculous no one would follow it.

You see that a lot today in the opinion editorials and sometimes on college campuses. An opponent of the gospel will lift some snippet of scripture that's hard to understand and ask a timid soul to explain how an ax head floated in the Jordan River or how Jonah survived three days in the belly of a fish? The point of the question is not about understanding the truth – it is humiliation. It is not about insight; it is about power. So much of what passes for theological conversation today is carnival cotton candy, filled with air but having no substance.

That's why it is so important for those who claim the gospel to know the gospel. When Eve responded, "God said we cannot touch the tree lest we die", she did so not with the intention to deceive, but because she hadn't really been paying attention. God had never said anything about touching the tree, but since she didn't really remember what he had said exactly, she made up some words of her own.

I know the feeling. People often ask me questions about what the Bible says. When I was younger I always wanted to provide an answer. I didn't want people to think they had a pastor who didn't know his Bible, so I'd give some kind of answer even if I wasn't sure. I'd fill in the blanks with my own opinion.

I try not to do that today because I find the idea of people confusing the word of Greg with the Word of God to be pretty scary and I think you do, to. Jesus said each of us will be held to account for every careless word we utter. In fact, he's pretty strong on it. "By your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned."¹

So, if you ask me a question about the Bible or why God said this or why God did that and I'm not confident in the answer, I'll ask you to wait until I can find the answer. Sometimes, I'll even tell you to keep it on a list of questions to ask Jesus when you see him in heaven. That's what I do and I have a long list of questions for Jesus.

Still we make the effort to daily learn more of God's Word. Faith should seek understanding, because as a "man thinks, so is he."² "There is a way that seems right to man, but the end thereof is death."³

When Jesus prepared to begin his ministry in prayer and solitude in the Judean wilderness, the same serpent who spoke to Eve spoke to him and the strategy was the same. He knew better than to challenge God directly. Instead, he

¹ Matthew 12:36-37

² Proverbs 23:7 KJV

³ Proverbs 16:25

raised the question, “Did God really say?” “If you are the son of God throw yourself from this cliff, for God said he will give his angels charge of you to guard you.”⁴ The tempter was using God’s Word to divert Jesus from God’s will. But, Jesus knew his Bible as well and responded, “You shall not tempt the Lord your God.”

God’s Word is a powerful force. It has been used to start wars and stop them. It is been used to foster hatred and encourage love. It has been used as a weapon to hurt and as a salve to heal.

So, we need to do our best to understand it. The apostle Paul once wrote, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”⁵

The next time someone asks you “Did God really say”; I hope you know the answer. The next time you ask yourself, “Did God really say”; I hope you will make the effort to find out.

We learn by asking questions. We grow closer to the Lord as we live in the truth that God has given, for Jesus says, “The truth will set you free.”⁶

Let us pray:

Lord, when we were children we spoke like a child, thought like a child, and reasoned like a child. When we became adults we put an end to childish ways, or tried to. Now we see in a mirror dimly, now we know only in part. Help us to know and to understand more fully.⁷ Help us to stand upon your promises. This we pray in the name of the word made flesh, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen,.

⁴ Luke 4:5-11

⁵ 2 Timothy 2:15

⁶ John 8:32

⁷ 1 Corinthians 13:11-12

