

Sermon: You Will Not Surely Die

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles PC, Ottawa, Feb. 26, 2023)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I've been thinking about the Garden of Eden, the paradise once belonging to the first humanity, now lost to all for eternity. The Garden of Eden is a paradox, containing both rich abundance and strict limitations.

The abundance, as described in Genesis 2, is mind boggling. A river flowing out, seemingly from the very essence of God, waters the garden. That river as it flows out of the garden, branches out into four other mighty rivers that would water large parts of the known world. Trees of every kind sprung up, bearing fruits that are pleasant to the sight and good for food, fruits that are freely available to be plucked and enjoyed. The tree of life was there, with its healing and rejuvenating quality continuously enriching the garden. So was the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Life, for the first couple and for all other created beings, was good.

But there were limitations for those living in the garden. Adam, created by God out of dirt, or *adama* in Hebrew, and breathed with the very breath of God, was placed in the garden to till it and keep it. He had to work, he was not to sit idly by. Work was good, it gave Adam purpose, it regulated the use of his time. Adam was to name every living creature there was—all cattle and birds of the air and every animal of the field. It was important work, as the act of naming creatures essentially placed the man in dominion over them, to rule over them. In time, Adam was given a helper, created out of the man's own ribs, whom he describes intimately as "*this at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.*" (Genesis 2:23). In due time, she would be given a name: Eve.

The other limitation, perhaps more serious and ominous, as stipulated by God to Adam, "*Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 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 **surely** die.*" (Genesis 2:16-17) We are not told as to why the fruit of that particular tree was forbidden. Such a prohibition lends itself to wide-open interpretations that biblical scholars are still debating it. However, we are sure of the consequence of eating its fruit,

as 'you shall **surely** die'. The actual Hebrew phrase is 'dying you shall die'. This repetition of the verb 'to die', is an emphatic way of stressing such a consequence, as leaving no doubt, whatsoever: 'you shall **surely** die'

It is to this limitation that the serpent, who was more cunning than any other beast of the field which the Lord God had made, came and tested the woman, "*Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?'*" (Genesis 3:1) Note the the original command was given by God to Adam directly, not to the woman. It stands to reason that the woman received it from the man, sort of second-handily.

So the woman said to the crafty serpent, "*We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden, but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.'*" (v.2). Have you noticed that the additional prohibition 'nor shall you touch it' was inserted in her reply. We are not sure if that was her imagination, or perhaps it came from Adam. However, when one is not precise in knowing what exactly God had commanded, it leaves one open to confusion and temptation.

Temptation did come, as the serpent said to the woman, "*You will not **surely** die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.*" (v.4-5) I can't help to see that on some level, the serpent was telling the truth. Eating fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil does open one's eyes, it does transmit such knowledge, and it does make one to be more like God.

The key question for us to ponder is 'will one **surely** die'?

To die' or *muth* in Hebrew, conveys a basic sense of separation. The bodily death is the separation of one's spirit from the body; whereas the spiritual death is the separation of one's spirit from its origin, its source. The death that God warned of Adam, perhaps threatened, is not the immediate drop-to-the-ground kind of death. It is the kind that separates humanity from immortality; it is the kind the separates our spirit from the Spirit of God. In essence, the desire to be more like God, inevitably cuts us off from the right kind of relationship with God.

For Adam and Eve, their foolishness in eating the forbidden fruit opened their eyes, they saw they were naked, and they were ashamed. They sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings. They

didn't become more like God, they hid themselves from God. Death thus began its work to have dominion over us.

I don't think we should be too critical or judgemental of Adam and Eve. We too are constantly tempted to be like God. When one takes a critical look at modern comforts of the 21st century North American living, one cannot escape the realization that we live 'God like'.

We expect to turn on electric lights after sundown,
just flick a switch;
we expect to control the internal temperature of our homes,
year round;
we expect living water (that is running water) at our command,
just turn on the tap;
we expect to access food at reasonable cost,
no more than 3% increase a year;
we expect to travel long distances in a short time,
fly if we have to.

For most of the history of humanity, our daily lives would be the stuff of fantasy. Our ancestors of not too distant past would agree, that someone who can create light, who can control temperature, who can travel continents in a single day, must be divine.

But we are far from divine. We have tasted what it is like to live 'God like', but we are not 'like God'. Worst, living 'God like' comes at a steep cost, which we are only starting to realize.

The increase in CO2 emission due to human activities is causing global temperature to climb rapidly. Extreme climate change is causing havoc in many parts of the world, which in turns is making the refugee crisis worse. If you have been following news lately of what's happening at Roxham Road, Quebec, you would undoubtedly realize this global migration of refugees is now at our border.

As much as we sometimes like to pretend we can bury our collective head in the sand and ignore this problem, we cannot. David Cohen, the U.S. Ambassador to Canada rightly pointed out, "Irregular migration is one of the major problems confronted by the Western Hemisphere and Roxham Road is just a symptom of that problem."

Living in abundance is good, but it must be limited. That is the lesson of today, as we observe the first Sunday of Lent.

I am grateful of the example of Jesus, who is fully human and fully divine, in resisting the temptations put to him, in choosing again and again to accept his human limits. Turning stone into bread? Testing the law of gravity (and of God)? Claiming all power and glory and riches? Nope, nope, and still nope.

I am grateful Jesus did so, while relying on the words of God in the Holy Scripture, while under the care of the Holy Spirit. Because if it was simply up to me, I am not sure I would've resisted the fruit offered to Eve and Adam. I most likely would have ate it, in fact, I am probably enjoying the fruit of it.

However, I trust that Christ has paved the way for humanity, for He is the way, the truth, and the life. Only in Him and through Him, can we confidently assert, 'we will not **surely** die'.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.