

*“Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions”**

Genesis 2:8-17

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In the beginning God’s spirit moved over the chaos and created order. The heavens and the earth appeared. God made the sky every shade of indigo you could imagine and set within it a golden sun for the day and the softer moon and stars at night. Out of the depths of the sea, land came forth. Mountains pushed their jagged edges toward the sky; rivers carved canyons, and forests spread out a thick blanket of green. Grizzly bears appeared and began to roam these forests; wild horses covered the expansive plains. Birds of every kind filled that indigo sky, and in the darkest corner of the ocean, the humpback whale let out its first mournful call. The dust of creation settled into the deserts, and it was there in the heat and dirt that the Creator scooped up a handful of sand. With the gentleness of a new mother, the Creator began to mold and shape—such precision to detail—two eyes, ten fingers and toes, a spinal cord to connect it all together, and a heart to keep it warm. Holding up the creation, God took a deep breath and then exhaled into the creature. The creature lived. God made two creatures in God’s own image, male and female, and called them human.

God placed the humans in the most beautiful corner of creation, Eden, paradise. Everywhere the humans looked there was beauty at the earth’s abundance. In the middle of Eden stood two trees. One was the tree of life, and the other was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God said to the humans, “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, eat freely of whatever you want, everything is yours, but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day you eat of it you shall die.” You may have everything I have created, God said, but not that. Everything, but.

Walking among the trees, the humans marveled at the low-hanging fruit, its juicy flesh so easily within reach; at their feet vegetation sprang forth; the animals gathered around waiting to be named. God had given the humans everything they ever could have needed; God had given them a purpose: to be fruitful and multiply. God had given them permission to subdue the earth. God had even given them prohibition—a boundary in the midst of such freedom: “You may have everything, but.”¹ Everything, but. A boundary, a limit, a border designed to contain and control.

In the beginning God’s spirit moved over the chaos and created order in the form of boundaries separating the heavens and the earth, the land and the sea, the fish and the birds, the trees and the plants, the humans and God. Ah, now that boundary is a little more blurry sometimes. The Appalachian Mountains cannot confuse themselves with the Atlantic Ocean. The camel cannot confuse itself with a peacock. But humans, humans can, at times, confuse themselves with God. We are, after all, fashioned in God’s image. We were, after all, given the purpose to tend the earth—the power of creation was essentially left in our hands. We were, therefore, given permission to use this power so that our lives may be fruitful. We are, as a result, a little less than God. The psalmist exclaims,

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,

The moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little less than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet.” (Psalm 8:3-6)

We are a little less than God, the Psalmist writes. Humans are a little less than God. “You are a little less than God,” the serpent whispered in the woman’s ear, “but wouldn’t you like to *be* God?”

You can picture the scene in your mind; we have all seen it many times, the evocative portrayal of the serpent curled around the tree and the first two humans reaching towards the forbidden fruit. The temptation of Adam and Eve is a scene that has captured the imagination of artists over the centuries, with painters returning to it again and again for inspiration—the rich color of their oils attempting to capture for the eye what we cannot hear in the text. Theologians, too, return to this text over and over again in an attempt to understand the breaking point—the reason why Adam and Eve were unable to resist the soft hiss of the serpent’s suggestion. Because we are told Adam and Eve were naked, it was not a far leap to assume sexuality was the reason for this first transgression. Historically, and in some cases still to this day, the church and Christian theologians label sexuality as the slippery slope of temptation. Women have been unjustly burdened with the bulk of responsibility for sexual temptation, but both women and men alike have been harmed by this overly sexualized interpretation of this story. Temptation may come in the form of sexuality, but it is not sexuality in and of itself.

What then, is temptation? Is it death? “For the day you eat of the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, on that day you will die,” God says. But then, Adam and Eve ate of the fruit and did not die, but went on to create life, and to this day they are seen as the Mother and Father of the human race. Temptation is not death.

What then, is temptation? Is it evil? Is temptation the continual choice between the light and the dark sides of life? So often when we think of temptation, we think of two choices laid out before us, one good and the other evil. After all, it was the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that Adam and Eve were instructed not to eat—you can have everything but that, God said. Yet rarely is temptation about only two choices: good or evil. Rarely is temptation an easy decision, a black or white answer, a clear direction when we come to a fork in the road. No, that is not how temptation works. Temptation is not loud, but quiet; Not demanding, but suggestive; not obvious, but so subtle you don’t realize it is upon you until you are caught in its thorns. Temptation is not one choice, but too many.

Adam and Eve were not tempted to be good or evil. They were tempted to be like God. They were tempted to cross the boundary that separated them from God. Humans are a little less than God, the Psalmist writes, and every day humans are tempted to confuse themselves with God. With the power of creation at our fingertips, the possibilities for our lives are endless. Temptation is not one choice, but too many.

Walter Brueggemann, renowned Old Testament scholar, says that the story of

Adam and Eve and the serpent is not a reflection on sex, on evil, or on death, but is, instead, a reflection on the troubled, anxiety-ridden life.² The troubled, anxiety-ridden life. Anxiety. I thought anxiety was a symptom of the modern era, the result of jam-packed schedules, and our ever-increasing attachment to email and cell phones. I thought anxiety was something that happened to us when life became overwhelming and we could not bear the burden of it all. I thought anxiety was the result of pressures outside us, not something that resides within is, tempting us, forever tempting us to do more.

As humans we were made a little less than God. The power of creation was given to us to subdue and use in order that we may live lives of abundance. “You may have everything,” God said, “but...” Then temptation came along and invited us to stretch out our fingers just past the boundary God created, and anxiety is what caused us to break it. “You may have everything,” God said, “but...”

It wasn’t evil. It wasn’t death. It wasn’t even the allure of sexual desire that caused the break of the boundary God created. It was anxiety, the desire to control more than we were created to control, the desire to know more than we were created to know. Anxiety: desire to do more than we were created to do. “You may have everything,” God said, “but...”

We were made a little less than God, but we are not God. Anxiety would have us believe otherwise. Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard said, “Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom” (*Concept of Anxiety*). And that is often what anxiety feels like, does it not? Dizzy with the demands in our lives. Dizzy with the stress we feel. Dizzy with the options, both good and bad, that continually plague our minds. We have so much freedom to choose, but at the same time, that very freedom is what keeps our minds spinning with the continual barrage of “what if” scenarios. What school should my child go to? What will happen if she gets into this one and not that one? What should I do about my job? Should I stay or should I go? How will I pay mortgages, rent, tuition? Where is my career headed? Will I be successful? Do I want to be successful? What will that mean for my family if I am away from them more? What did I do with my life? Was it meaningful? Did I live up to my potential? Did I make the right choices? No matter what our age or life circumstance, anxiety finds us; it is a disorder of the mind for many and part of the human condition for all.

A more accurate portrayal of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden might be one that has them both with their hands over their heads, trying to block out the thoughts that raced through their minds—thoughts represented by that snake softly hissing, “The possibilities are endless.” The mistake Adam and Eve made was thinking that more would make the anxiety go away. More knowledge. More power. More time to live up to their potential. More events in their schedules, more money in the bank, more lines on their resumes, more acclaim from their peers.

But more was not the answer then anymore than it is now. The relief from our anxiety is not to be found in more, but in less. “We are a little less than God,” the Psalmist writes, which is why God gave us a boundary to begin with. You may have everything, but.

Made a little less than God, we were given enormous freedom. Made a little less than God, we are made dizzy by that freedom and therefore need boundaries around it. Boundaries, limits on what we can realistically do in 24 hours and boundaries

around what we can realistically hope for our lives. “You could have it all,” the snake whispered, “the possibilities are endless.” That was the first lie ever told, and we have believed it ever since. We have everything at our fingertips, but that does not mean we need to grab it. We have everything within our reach, but that does not mean we should no longer discern what is truly in our best interest. We have everything bestowed upon us by the goodness of God, but we would do well to remember, to daily remind ourselves, that we are not God. We cannot control it all. We cannot know it all. We cannot be it all. We need boundaries around ourselves and others, boundaries around our time and energy, boundaries around ourselves so that we are rightly reminded of our place in this world as beloved creatures made a little less than God.

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* Title borrowed from Gloria Steinem’s book of the same name, Holt Paperbacks, 2nd ed., 1995.

Notes

1 Walter Brueggemann, “Genesis,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (John Knox Press, 2010), 52.

2 Ibid., 42.