

You certainly don't need to be a lifelong Christian to be familiar with today's story from Genesis. The first two humans are given all the fruit from all the trees in the garden to eat, except the fruit from one tree ... but they end up breaking that one rule. All that was needed was a nudge from the crafty serpent and Eve was willing to take a bite, and, being the good partner she was, she shared what she had with her beloved, who, without hesitation, also ate of the forbidden fruit.

... and so it began.

This is the story that would go on to be interpreted as the very reason why Jesus entered into human history: Jesus is the ultimate 'redo' for Creation. The first time 'round it had all gone wrong, and so Eve's disobedience is fixed by Mary's obedience to God, Adam's decision brings death to the world, and is fixed by Jesus who brings eternal life. It's all nice and tidy, a 'new' Creation.

By the 5th century, some of the Church Fathers had come to interpret this story as the defining moment in the story of humanity now known as "the Fall"¹ – meaning, because those first two humans disobeyed God, all of Creation had now fallen away from communion with God, this new state is marked by death and suffering, disorder, struggle and strife, and there was essentially nothing any human could ever have done to repair the relationship that had been broken. Jesus, the only child of God, was the only one who could restore that relationship, but in order to that he needed to take on the sinfulness of the world, and be obedient, all the way to the cross.

¹ esp. Augustine

The crucifixion is horrendous to contemplate, an enormous price to pay. And over time, those Church Fathers did then what's still kinda standard today as a response to something awful, some unpleasant reality, something that's already happened and so can't be changed now ... they found someone to blame.

The serpent, the serpent was soon identified as Satan and so the serpent/Satan was quickly called out as the instigator of the whole thing, and that seems pretty legit. But perhaps more dangerously, for about half the world's population, there's also Eve. Eve, who was dubbed "the devil's gateway" by one of the Western church's most influential Church Fathers.² Although Adam, the first human created, is ultimately seen as being the one ultimately responsible for bringing about The Fall, although, yes, Adam is held responsible ... for a very long time indeed the context for Adam's behavior has been the seductive and sinister persuasion of Eve who was in league with the devil. So, yes, Adam was wrong, but man, if it hadn't have been for those other two...

And so ideas about Satan and his minions have been used ever since to lessen human responsibility, and ideas about women ... the interpretation of Eve's role in this story is a terrific way to shore up misogyny, justify the patriarchy and position women not only as intellectually and rationally inferior, but also as manipulative, and under the influence of evil forces,

² Tertullian, *De Cultu Feminarum*, c.200CE ["And do you not know that you are [each] an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. *You* are the devil's gateway: *you* are the unsealer of that [forbidden] tree: *you* are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* destroyed so easily God's image, man." <https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Women#T>]

Eve used her ‘powers’ on Adam to get him to do what ‘the dark side’ wanted him to do.³ This particular interpretation of the story is definitely still in the mix, and has arguably negatively impacted women for dozens of generations, in the Western world and beyond.

And the thing is, and this is really important for us to remember, absolutely none of that is actually in the text. It’s all just interpretation.

So I’d like to propose another interpretation – based on something else that’s also not in the text: when the crafty serpent makes his suggestion, Eve listens to what it says and goes along with it, Adam follows Eve and goes along with it .. even though they *both* knew the rule God had given them. When the serpent made its suggestion, and got them thinking, wondering, when they noticed the fruit was a “delight to the eyes,” why didn’t they go back to God before taking such a big step, before breaking God’s only rule? Why didn’t they trust the foundational relationship of their lives and all Creation for guidance? Why respond, instead, to a distracting crafty voice? At this point, remember, there was no sin, they hadn’t yet eaten the fruit, there was no sinful inclination in the world or in those first humans ... so why not go back to God first, before doing something they would come to regret?

Why is this story not interpreted as one that shows just how easily distracted from our relationship with God the human person can be ... distracted by stuff we hear and are told, stuff we see in the world around us that catches our attention;

³ In renaissance art, Eve is often depicted as if she’s in collusion with the serpent, and more than a little sinister. See: <https://premierchristian.news/us/news/article/renaissance-paintings-of-adam-and-eve-symbolised-sexism-says-professor>

why isn't this a story that shows just how little it takes for us to forget our foundational, life-giving relationship. It really doesn't take much for us to forget God. We may not mean to separate ourselves from God, but we're distractable. Why didn't this become a story about the possible cost, to us and to all Creation, of our distractibility, our openness to persuasion, our forgetfulness of God?

Well, if we interpreted it like that there'd be no scapegoat for us to thump, and where's the satisfaction in that?

The truth is, it is so easy for us to forget God, the ground of our being, the very reason and purpose of our existence; and this Genesis story, is the story of the consequences of that. Listen to those persuading voices, allow yourself to be distracted, forget the "rules" we've been given and there are consequences. Bad ones.

Those first humans had one rule as they lived in glorious communion with God and all Creation, and yet they were persuaded, very easily, that the consequences of breaking it really won't be that bad, in fact they'll be good. We've essentially been give two: love God with all your heart, mind, and soul and love your neighbor as yourself – how many times have we been persuaded to break those, over and over again, often even for "good reasons"; and how the grave the consequences for breaking them continue to be.

The crafty serpent is still talking and the human story as it's playing out is still being interpreted badly, we still seek out the ones to blame, rather than recognizing our own distractibility, our own drift from God: it could be women, it could be migrants, or immigrants, or folks whose sexuality or gender don't conform to a perceived 'norm' – it could be folks who aren't white or folks who don't speak English, or who aren't 'American' – it could be folks who have too much, or folks who have nothing, or folks who don't vote the way we do. The list of possible candidates for why things are the way they are is long today – because the story of how we got here is still being interpreted badly.

Our Christian tradition, along with many others across the planet, calls us to center our lives on God, in love, through communion/relationship, have this as the Way we approach all of life. When we notice that crafty voice saying it's fine to speak badly of someone, judge someone, ignore God's call to care for our neighbor or the stranger, ignore Jesus's call to love our enemy, whenever we hear that voice tell us it's ok to do something other than stick with the rule, God's rule to love God with all our heart mind and soul, and love our neighbor as ourselves, the very first thing we should do, before we act on it, before we respond to that crafty voice, is return to God. Use what we know, the practices we have to discern God's will for our lives; slow down, pray, listen deeply, think about the long-ranging and far-reaching consequences of minimizing the rule we've been given.

Lent is the perfect time to meditate on all this, a season of observances and practices that are intended to refocus our awareness on the foundational relationship of our lives. This season isn't for suffering or punishment, but for freedom, freedom from all the rotten distractions and evil influences, all those crafty voices that would have us think, act, and live in a way that creates a future none of us want to live in.

Lent is our time to go back to God, and to practice listening for that reassuring, course-correcting presence in our lives, through self-examination and repentance, by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word.

The crafty serpent is still jabbering away, and suggesting and persuading; our task, this Lent and always, is to learn to recognize its voice, recognize it so we can ignore it and live. Our lives and the life of all the world depends on it.