

## “Eyes Wide Open”

The Presbyterian Church in Leonia

February 22, 2026 First Sunday of Lent Year A

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

When I first began to serve here, (and that was over 25 years ago), one older woman confessed to a friend that she wasn't sure she was ready for a female pastor. We've come a long way as a church, and as a society! But some people still have trouble with women in leadership roles. Last year many women in national positions of leadership were either fired or demoted by the current administration. The fringe movement that advocates keeping women in their place at home, is finding its way back into mainstream society. Some Christian Nationalists even advocate repealing the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment which gave women the right to vote. A lot of the motivation for this is political and has little to do with faith. But people have used the Bible for many generations to justify keeping women in their place at home.

You can find it with the first the book of the Bible, Genesis chapter 3, that Suzanne (Ellen) read from this morning. Some people think that if it wasn't for *that* woman, Eve, who *seduced* Adam into eating the fruit, we'd all still be living lives of *ease* in the Garden of Eden. It was Eve who listened to the serpent, then took the fruit and *ate* it. And *she* gave it to Adam to eat too.

But this story is not about keeping women in their place. Adam and Eve were in this together. Couldn't Adam think for himself? The more interesting question is, why would God put a special fruit in the middle of the garden, point it out to both of them, and then tell them, “Don't eat it?”

If you've ever had children (or a husband ... or wife for that matter), you know that if you don't want anyone to nibble on your tasty dish, you don't leave it out within reach, show it to them, and then say, “Don't touch!” If you are serious about saving something, you keep it out of sight and out of reach. And so we might wonder whether God actually wanted people to eat the fruit of that tree.

One of God's own creatures, the serpent, told Eve, “You won't die if you eat that fruit. God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

Notice that Eve was *not* being tempted to vices like gluttony, lust or greed. The serpent was appealing to her higher self, her moral and spiritual capacities. Eve considered: the fruit would make good food, and was beautiful. But most important, it would make her wise. And isn't wisdom a godly virtue? So Eve took a bite, and Adam joined her. The serpent told the truth, at least in part. Adam and Eve did not literally die that day. And their eyes were opened.

What is sinful about that?

Traditionally people say that the sin of Adam and Eve was disobedience. But did God really want blind obedience from people, something even a dog can learn? Wouldn't God prefer that people make choices based on knowledge and understanding of good and evil? Eve and Adam did disobey, and it was the beginning of trouble. But is it possible that they also gained something by this temptation?

Adam and Eve were different after they ate the fruit. They had been naked all along. But suddenly they were aware of it, and they sewed leaves together to cover

themselves. As they became conscious of themselves, they also became aware of right and wrong, qualities that set them apart from other animals and made them more like God. So, in a sense, we could call this story the RISE of humankind, rather than the FALL, because the result of this temptation was consciousness and moral judgment, which have the potential to bring us closer to God.

But there were also negative results. Adam and Eve may have risen in consciousness, but they fell from grace. Once they became aware, they hid from God and looked for someone to blame. Adam blamed Eve. Eve blamed the serpent, and trouble began. With the knowledge of good and evil also comes the ability to choose and act independently from God, and to participate in evil. So God drove them out of the garden, and into the wilderness to a life of hardship and pain.

And that is our lives as human beings. At our best, we do know good and evil, and can choose what's right and good. But we also tend to indulge ourselves, believe we can handle everything on our own, hide from God and blame others when we fail. We are tempted, and we don't always choose what is good.

In the gospel lesson this morning, Jesus was also tempted. This was right after he was baptized and before he began his public ministry, and Jesus had spiritual and moral choices to make as he started his work. At his baptism, Jesus had heard a voice from heaven saying, "This is my son, the beloved." But what does it mean to be a beloved Son, or the Son of God? Did it mean he could just do whatever he wanted? What was God calling Jesus to be and to do during his short life on earth? So he went into the wilderness to pray and discern God's will.

After 40 days and 40 nights he was hungry. So the tempter said, "Since you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread." If Jesus were able to turn stones into bread, he could feed himself, and not have to worry about where his next meal would come from. He could also hand out an unlimited supply of bread to the crowds. That would certainly make him popular. But we human beings do not live by bread alone. We also need God's words of justice, mercy and truth. Handing out food is something we can do in faith. But that's not all there is. Simply providing bread does not address the deeper needs and questions of life, nor does it address the question of justice, why some people are hungry and others are not. Jesus had to do and be more than a provider of bread.

Next the tempter dared Jesus to jump off the very top of the Temple. This would be a test of God's angels, whether they would intervene to save him. It also would have dazzled great crowds and made Jesus into a superstar, the center of attention. And it would make him *seem* to be exempt from the laws of nature. Remind you of anyone who wants to exempt himself from laws? But Jesus came as a servant. He was to do what was needed, not what would focus attention on himself.

And lastly, the tempter offered Jesus power over all the kingdoms of the world. If Jesus had that kind of power, he could usher in God's Kingdom on Earth the easy way, skim off whatever he wanted for his own comfort, and avoid the hard work and suffering of living among the people, and speaking truth to power. But God's Kingdom does not work that way. The devil uses manipulation, lies and force. God's reign is based on truth and honoring the free will and integrity of all. God *invites* us to participate in God's justice, mercy and love. And so Jesus renounced evil and answered, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and God only shall you serve!"

Notice that it was God's Spirit that led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. It was part of God's plan for Jesus to see the choices before him, and what was at stake. And

when we are tempted, the trick is to realize it, and take it as an opportunity to think about who we are, and what kind of people God calls us to be.

What are *your* greatest temptations? Many of us are tempted by things like sex, food, drugs, or the internet. But we may also be tempted to blame others for our problems, spread rumors, lie, or speak evil of others to build ourselves up. We may be tempted to discount our own power to make a difference, and therefore sit around and do nothing. What are you tempted by and how do you deal with it? When we are aware of what is at stake, we can call on God, and find power to choose what is good. And then temptation can bring us more fully into relationship with God.

Some *churches* are tempted to cling to the past and try to keep everything the same. Other churches may charge ahead without taking the time to reflect deeply in prayer, and discern where God is leading them. The decisions you make as a church shape your identity, and hopefully bring you closer to God.

And what the church says and does is even more important these days, because our identity as a nation is being tested now, and we are drifting away from godly values. What kind of nation do we want to be? Will the Christian Nationalists define who we are as a nation? Will violent ICE agents define us? Will we define ourselves by cancelling the voices and talents of people who are different? Will we be defined by billionaires who take more and more for themselves, regardless of the cost to everyone else? Will we be defined by leaders who believe they are exempt from the law, and can bully others into doing their will, or else be silent?

What can we as individual Christians, and together as churches do to show a better way? I know that this church is already shining the light of God in many ways, helping victims of violence by providing a home for them in the Oelhaf House, with your work with CoFia to help immigrants, by volunteering with Family Promise to provide meals to people in need, teaching English, and probably other new things I don't even know about anymore. If you are not part of any of these efforts, I encourage you to find a way to support this work.

I think also of people in Portland or Minneapolis, who have been showing up for their neighbors to witness and hold ICE accountable for the way they have been treating people. But even locally here, you can get to know the neighbors on your own block, and find more ways to be kind.

Last Wednesday, churches across the world began the season of Lent by observing Ash Wednesday. We received a cross of ashes imprinted on our foreheads and the words, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." As we begin the journey of Lent, the 40 days leading up to Holy Week where we focus on Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, may we remember that we are here on this earth only for a short time. What kind of people do we want to be, before we leave this earth? May we open our eyes to the choices before us, as individuals, as a church, and as a nation, and call out and resist any complicity with evil. And may we live as fully as we can, with our eyes wide open, to choose the way of Christ, and live according to God's will and reign on earth. In Jesus' name, Amen.