

THE UNFORBIDDEN FRUIT

Lent 1 – Year A: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

Location, location, location!

When Graham, our elder son, was a boy, he was captivated by an educational television show, *Where in the World is Carmen San Diego?* It was a quiz show of sorts in which an imaginary character, Carmen San Diego, had travelled somewhere in the world, somewhere unknown to the studio audience, and somewhere also unknown to the unnumbered audience sitting at home in front of their televisions. There were cryptic messages dispatched by Carmen from her mystery location throughout the show, clues she sent to help solve the mystery. The audience, both in the studio and at home, was cast in the role of detectives. By the end of each program, the mystery had been solved and the super sleuths watching and participating in the studio had received an amazing geography lesson.

The show was popular with children because it was fresh and creative, high energy and funny. It was popular with parents, because it was educational, fresh, creative, high energy, and funny. There was also a board game which, I believe, was marketed in this area by our own members; I know Graham received one for Christmas one year as a result of an order from one of our parish Christmas Craft and Bake Sales. When I ask myself why *Where in the World is Carmen San Diego* and the *Where's Waldo* books and even the film *Forrest Gump* was so popular in that period of about 15 to 20 years ago, I can only credit the information explosion of that time. Because of huge advances in communications technology and the ability to travel anywhere quickly and fairly inexpensively by plane, the world was shrinking; and North Americans, largely because of our affluence and ability to access the world wide web, were the first to benefit. In order to process all the information we now received daily from various media, we needed to reorient ourselves in what had become the new world environment. Nations and peoples we never knew existed were now part of the day's news. The phrase "information overload" was coined in order to describe the challenge people were having making the transition from the world as they had known it before there was an internet, computers in every home, and eventually, smart phones in every pocket and purse.

After hearing this morning's readings from Genesis and Matthew, we might also find ourselves needing re-orientation. Most of us know the stories of Adam and Eve and Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, but where in the world are they on our map of faith and understanding? Where and what is the garden in which Adam and Eve live? Where is this wilderness in which Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights? Location, location, location!

The garden is not Adam and Eve's, we realize early in this morning's reading; it is God's garden, and the first man and the first woman can live there forever, by God's grace. There is no rent, no exchange of services; all is in perfect equilibrium; the garden in heaven on earth. The man and the woman eat from the Tree of Life, and as long as they do so, they will live forever.

But there is a spoiler or two in the garden. One of the trees is off limits and has forbidden fruit. There is a talking serpent who interpreters of the Genesis story often identify as the devil. The text never says this, however, and so it may be best not to make that assumption quickly. And there is free will, given by God to the man and the woman. With this new information, with these clues about the spoilers, God's garden begins to resemble our world in-waiting. And, of course, it only takes a couple of bites of the forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil for everything to change; for Adam and Eve's location to change from balanced and protected to wild and chaotic; from children cared for and nurtured by a loving parent-God to teenagers individuated and needing to develop life skills in order to survive. And death is now part of this new wild garden of which humans are part owners. "In addition to everything else," God tells the man and the woman, "you're going to have to look after the place."

The story is artfully written. It addresses the problem of mortality; it advances the idea of God's immortality and benevolence; it contemplates free choice and human will versus God's will; it creates the context for the human condition, including both an awareness and disregard for God's call to return to our primitive excellence; and it reveals the frailty of human nature and its penchant for what we may describe as sin or evil. "Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God? Do you renounce the powers

of this world that rebel against God? Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you from God?" our baptismal rite asks. "I renounce them," we answer with conviction. But we know, sooner or later, even though we know better and have drawn our line in the sand, that our desire for power and control will lead us where we would not go. "[The good that I would, that do I not," wrote Saint Paul; "but what I hate, that I do."

The wilderness or desert into which the Spirit leads Jesus immediately following his baptism by John in the River Jordan, seems, at first, as other-worldly as the Garden appeared in the Genesis account. There is no talking serpent, but Satan is in this wilderness, and when he knows Jesus is at his weakest, famished after 40 days without food, Jesus is tested. "If you are the Son of God" prefaces two of Satan's temptations to Jesus. And it is this component of the wilderness account that suggests a different location from where we might find ourselves. "This is about Jesus," we say, "and his identity. Somehow, Jesus needs to change the story from the one we read in Genesis. We need a second ending, a better ending to the old story of temptation in order to be able to live in hope." And, of course, Jesus does not disappoint us. He stands his ground, he does not misuse or abuse his power; and he does not give Satan power over him. But even though Jesus triumphs, and even though Matthew has not placed us in this story, we feel the struggle. We are not Jesus, but the moral landscape is familiar: there is always temptation in the world we live in; there is always the choice to stand firm, do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God, or cave and follow the course of least resistance. Location, location, location: we know this God-forsaken place Jesus made holy. And in Lent, we seek kinship with Jesus' wilderness experience through the covenant we make on Ash Wednesday and renew on each Sunday in Lent: our 40 days are not to be characterized by enjoying the privilege and power we have; rather we are challenged by Jesus' example to journey through our 40 days in the wilderness with repentance, fasting, prayer, and works of love as our landmarks. We hope, somehow, to amend our lives, and follow more closely the call of discipleship in order to enter with a new appreciation and deeper understanding a third location – not particularly unlike God's garden, not particularly unlike the wilderness, but changed by a new planting.

I spent most of yesterday at Renison College at a Liturgy Canada conference, much like the one for which Christ Church were hosts two years ago. One of the presenters referred to a theological construct that was familiar to everyone there – the idea of the Cross of Christ as God's new planting in God's garden. Normally, I would have received that interpretation of Christ's saving work without difficulty; but this winter, Sheryl has had our choir rehearsing *There in God's Garden* to be sung as this morning's anthem. It's a hymn from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, so that it is not unknown; we sing it often as a congregation. But singing it this early in Lent got my attention, because it challenges the notion that God has planted the Cross of Christ in the garden. The hymn text suggests that it is not a sign of Christ's resurrection that is planted in God's garden, but Christ himself; that Christ is the Tree of Wisdom, given for the deep needs of the world; that Christ and his gospel are the gifts we need to live once more as the children of God in the garden and in the desert that is our world.

We do have information overload. Project Ploughshares said a year or so ago that there is less war and violence in our world than ever before in the world's history; but it doesn't seem like it. We know first-hand of oppression and injustice and failures in governance and failures in economics and politics, almost before they happen. And sadly, tragically, at the heart of the world's suffering is an emptiness, a void, a loss of a moral centre that is nothing more and nothing less than the first man and the first woman agreeing with the serpent that the forbidden fruit is "good for food, a delight for the eyes, and the way to wisdom."

Jesus, the Tree of Wisdom, says to us, men, women, and children, "You have a choice. You can eat the forbidden fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, or you can eat the unforbidden fruit of justice, love, mercy, forgiveness, and peace which I will give you freely / which I have given you freely."

We are not alone, we live in God's world we prayed a few months ago, using the creed of the United Church of Canada. Jesus, the Tree of Wisdom, calls us to claim the world as God's, with all the gifts, all the wisdom, knowledge, and love he has given us to do so. "Come," he says, "eat the unforbidden fruit of the gospel. It is this world's hope."

