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**Reading:** Genesis 2 and 3

**The Message:** From Garden to Wilderness

We often hear this passage from Genesis -- one of the creation stories in Genesis -- read with the passage from Luke which describes Jesus' experience in the wilderness, being tempted by Satan. The Garden of Eden soon leads to the wilderness, and it is the wilderness where Jesus begins his ministry, showing us how to survive in the wilderness of sin.

Like many stories in Genesis, the story helps the people of the time to explain important questions about certain realities in life:

- Why is there pain in childbirth?
- Why is the ground hard to work?
- Why do snakes crawl upon the earth?
- Why does evil exist?

Every people at every time have asked the question, "how did evil come into our world?"

It should come as no surprise that the ancient people of Israel would ask the question too, and tell this story of the first humans in a perfect garden, well-watered by four great rivers, with trees of beauty and function. The detail is significant. There was order to the garden, the trees were placed carefully. God has intentions for humans and one of those intentions was that we would live in a garden. There was a rule in the garden: 'you can eat of all of the trees in the garden.' There was another rule: 'don't eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.'

They have perfect freedom of will, freedom to worship God, freedom to tend the garden, freedom to enjoy the fruits of creation. There is just one rule: don't eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. One measly rule in this incredibly perfect life.

The first humans knew the rules and just had to follow them to remain in the garden, to remain one with creation.

They broke that one rule. They exploited the garden for their own use, and humans have been exploiting the garden for their own purposes ever since.

And the result in this ancient story which has such poignant resonance with us today, living in the wasteland of a perpetually exploited garden -- is that humans ended up in a wilderness instead of a garden. Back in the wars in Kuwait, the location of this garden was bombed mercilessly. Think of what might have been.

Sadly humans still haven't figured out what God created them for;

- haven't figured out that there are some things that are holy and need to be treated with respect;
- haven't figured out their role in relationship to God's role;
- haven't appreciated the gift of God's creation or how to tend it.

How did evil come into the world? Human beings did what they thought was good for themselves. They assumed that they were the most important.

God's command is clear concerning the tree of knowledge, though no reason is given for it. The human couple shall not eat from the tree's fruit, "for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Genesis 2:17).

So the surprising thing in this passage is not that the human beings disobey and eat. Rather, the shock comes from the fact that the humans, after eating the fruit, do not die but continue to live. God threatened immediate death upon violation of the command, and yet the human beings continue to survive.

We know from this text, that God has entered into a permanent relationship with us, despite our sins and shortcomings.

After the first couple is expelled from the garden, God continues to provide for them. They continue to live -- even thrive -- outside of the garden by being fruitful and multiplying (4:1--2). There will be more exiles to the wilderness both figuratively and literally for the people of Israel and for millions of people down through human history.

I don't know if my face shows something of my passion for the outcast, but when we, along with the rest of Mexico City, went to the Cathedral on Ash Wednesday for the imposition of ashes, I was singled out by a family to tell me their story of being deported from California. Their children are American born, but they are all on the outside of the life they knew. They asked if I could help them return.

These banishments from humane, God-inspired communities, symbolised here by the garden of Eden, are at the hands of people who have placed themselves as God, deciding what is right and good for other people, or even worse, for themselves. Whether we think we are making decisions for others with the best of intentions, it's quite likely, in the wilderness we all live in, that the consequences will be evil for someone.

God continued to let human beings live despite their attempt to replace God. God gave humanity a second chance, a third. Up to infinity, God adapted to us, provided human beings with the essentials of faith to keep us adaptable, resilient, robust in our faith.

Those are the qualities of faith that Jesus showed us in the wilderness when tempted by Satan, a faith that wouldn't be tested, a faith strong enough to resist temptation.

Often Lent is seen as forty days set aside for a very personal, individual journey. We give up things that are bad for us individually. It's a time for introspection, self-denial, prayer, and study.

Thinking about Genesis pushes out our boundaries of how we journey through Lent.

Because here in Genesis we have a story that focuses us on the cosmic, communal nature of God's redeeming activity. Reading it, we have to acknowledge the special relationship that exists between God and all of creation.

This story pushes even further: it teaches us that even creation should be included in our compassion.

If God enters into relationship with all humans and with creation, surely we are called to tend the needs of others and the needs of creation.

Remember that there are cosmic implications of the choices you make this Lent.