

Abundance and limits (Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7)

Like the first humans, I am far from divine.

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March 3, 2017

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The Garden of Eden is a place of paradox, containing both great abundance and strict limits. It is an apt image for God's providence and for God's boundaries.

The garden is a place of plenty. Food hangs from trees, freely available to be plucked and enjoyed. Though the human is expected to "till and keep" the land, this isn't a sentence to endless labor. Humans need good work; tending the land from which we were taken (dust from dust) is an appropriate use of our energies.

But the garden has its rules. God has placed a forbidden tree in the midst of bounty. This "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" is the one thing the humans may not consume. And yet they do, almost at the first available opportunity. Why? Their ambitions outstrip their capacity. They want to be "like God."

So do I. I want to be able to turn on electric lights after the sun goes down. I want to be able to travel long distances in a short time. I want clean water available at a moment's notice. I want my Michigan home to retain a comfortable internal temperature, year round.

Electricity, air travel, tap water, and a furnace may be my birthright as a well-off, 21st-century American. But in no way are they common to the human experience. For most of history, my daily life would be the stuff of fantasy. Generations before me would agree: someone who can create and extinguish light, who can travel across a continent in a single day, must be divine.

But like the first humans, I am far from divine. I have reached out and tasted that which I cannot sustain. My convenience comes at a cost: as global temperatures climb, humanity is being steadily ushered outside the gates of Eden. Sometimes you leave the garden; sometimes the garden leaves you. Climate change causes desertification, and there is little doubt that it will make the refugee crisis worse. Displaced people displace people. Ultimately, everyone is affected.

I am grateful for Jesus: the human who was fully divine, but when tempted by the devil, chose over and over again to accept his human limits. Create food from stones? Defy the law of gravity? Claim all riches? Nope, nope, and again nope. I wonder what he would say today if I offered him a GMO tomato, an airline ticket, and a seat on the New York Stock Exchange.

Even more: I wonder what I have to learn from Jesus about accepting the limits of my own humanity. I literally have no idea how to live without the comfort of convenience. The paradox of the garden is a paradox within me: I eat from the tree while I wonder, like Adam and Eve with fruit in their mouths, just how strict and final those limits really are.