

JESUS CHRIST THE APPLE TREE

The LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Genesis 2: 8-10,15-17; 3:1-7

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the [tempter] took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the [tempter] took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the [tempter] left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Matthew 4: 1-11

At the end of this sermon, the choir will be singing an anthem called "Jesus Christ the Apple Tree." The music is by Elizabeth Poston, but the text is an anonymous hymn composed sometime around the middle of the 18th century.

The first time I heard it, about 40 years ago, was from a recording of the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols from King's College, Cambridge. It is one of the most frequently performed carols in their Christmas Eve service since it was introduced in the late 1960s. It has become one of my favorite Christmas carols. But here's an odd thing—there is nothing in the text about the birth of Jesus. There are no heralding angels, no frightened shepherds, no magi with mysterious gifts. Mary and Joseph and Bethlehem are not mentioned at all. The central conceit is, as the title announces, simply a comparison between Jesus Christ and an apple tree.

How is Jesus Christ like an apple tree, you may ask? And why is the choir singing what has become a standard Christmas carol on the first Sunday of Lent?

Good questions. Let's begin by taking a look at the hymn-text.

*The tree of life my soul has seen, laden with fruit and always green:
The trees of nature fruitless be compared with Christ the apple tree.*

*His beauty doth all things excel: by faith I know, but ne'er can tell
The glory which I now can see in Jesus Christ the apple tree.*

*For happiness I long have sought, and pleasure dearly I have bought:
I missed of all; but now I see 'tis found in Christ the apple tree.*

*I'm weary with my former toil; here I will sit and rest a while:
Under the shadow I will be of Jesus Christ the apple tree.*

*This fruit doth make my soul to thrive, it keeps my dying faith alive;
Which makes my soul in haste to be with Jesus Christ the apple tree.*

One of the first things you may notice is that this hymn seems to have more in common with our reading from Genesis than with the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. You may have noticed the specific reference to the tree of life. And throughout the hymn there are allusions to trees and fruit as metaphors of just about all the aspects of human life—happiness, pleasure, toil, weariness, faith, and particularly the thriving of the soul. But there is also a contrast between the trees of nature, which are barren and fruitless, and Jesus Christ, the tree of life who is green and laden with fruit. That seems straightforward enough, but why did the author of this hymn choose to depict Christ not only as a tree, but specifically as an apple tree?

If we were asked to re-tell in our own words the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden and the series of events that lead up to their expulsion from paradise, how many of us would come up with some version that includes them taking a bite out of an apple? That's the story most of us carry around in our heads. But if you read Genesis carefully, whether in an English translation or the original Hebrew, you will find no mention of apples. The text says that the garden contained "every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food," but names only two trees. Well, doesn't really name them, but describes them as the "tree of life" and the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil." There is no mention of what kind of fruit any of these trees bear.

So, if the fruit in the story is not specified, how did we come to associate the fall of humanity with eating apples? Well, it may have come from a connection based on similar sounding Latin words. The Latin noun *malum* means "apple" or "apple tree." But there is a Latin adjective *malus*, which means "bad" and which is sometimes used in its accusative form as a noun, also *malum*, to mean "an evil thing," "and evil person," or "evil" itself. The conjecture is that sometime in the early medieval era these two words—the Latin words for "apple" and "evil"—were associated with the Genesis story to give us the apple as the forbidden fruit that introduces sin and evil into the world.

But picking and eating a piece of fruit—whether it is an apple, a fig, or a kumquat—is really beside the point in the Genesis story. It is less about eating some forbidden fruit and all about a lack of trust in God. God places humans in a bountiful garden, with everything we need to live a full and abundant life. But, like a good parent, God also sets some boundaries and limits. We are not satisfied with living within the boundaries that God sets and prefer to set our own limits, to choose for ourselves what is best not for life in this world as God intended it, but for our own satisfaction and desire. In effect, we place ourselves in the center rather than God.

And this, not some indiscretion with a slice of apple pie, is not only the point of the Genesis story it is the point of contact with the story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness.

A key part of understanding the story of Jesus in the wilderness is to see its connection to all

of the events that precede it in Matthew's Gospel. When Jesus passed through the waters of birth, God became human like one of us. Matthew even uses an ancient name—Emmanuel, “God with us.” And when Jesus passed through the waters of baptism, he reveals a God who not only takes on flesh and blood, but also wades into the muddy waters of humanity, in solidarity with saints and sinners, sheep and wolves, taking on himself our weaknesses, our failures, our disappointments.

Matthew reports that immediately following his baptism, Jesus stands there still dripping with the water of the Jordan River, still hearing the echoes of the voice that declares him the Beloved Son. And that same Spirit of God that descended him as he came up from the waters of baptism, leads him into the wilderness, where he faces down a tempter.

The biggest temptation that Jesus faced, though, was not mastering physical hunger. The greatest temptation was to avoid the way of suffering, to take the way of control and power, to use extraordinary power or connections in order to avoid or alleviate the deprivations of the desert, the emptiness and the hunger of the desert fast. The biggest temptation was to rely on a source other than God to fill the emptiness and satisfy the hunger.

The story seems to be less about a heroic effort to overcome the kind of temptations we might eschew during Lent—giving up chocolate or coffee or social media—and more about giving up reliance on yourself in order to find your true self. In the wilderness you give up everything, not to prove your self-control or powers of endurance, but rather to discover who you are when you have let go of everything that is non-essential. You discover the paradox at the center of the Christian faith and life: that to find your life, your authentic life, you have to lose it; to save your life, you have to give it away. You find that loving God and neighbor with all your heart and soul and mind is your true identity, the person you were meant to be all along. All the things that impede your true nature, all other ways of being are false, not true to who you truly are and were meant to be.

The barren wilderness is the antithesis of the beautiful, bountiful garden. But what Jesus shows us is that God has set out to redeem the wilderness, to redeem our brokenness by becoming broken himself. One of the trees in the garden stands as a sign of abundant life. But the other one, the one we choose again and again, stands as a sign of our separation from God. Left to our own devices, we will always pull back within ourselves, lean back toward what we think is best for us, what makes us feel more comfortable, what serves our own best interests. But in Jesus Christ, God becomes the tree, takes on our sin, and closes the gap. In Jesus Christ, the tree of crucifixion is redeemed and in resurrection becomes a fruitful tree of life.

The drama that is suggested by the imagery of Jesus Christ the life-giving, life-restoring apple tree follows closely the drama that we encounter each year on our journey through Lent into Holy Week and on to Easter. And that drama is not only played out in Lent, it is the story our lives—the story of how our separation from God leads to death, and how the grace of God leads us back into life. It is the story of how, as Nadia Bolz-Weber says, “God simply keeps reaching down into the dirt of humanity and resurrecting us from the graves we dig for ourselves through our violence, our lies, our selfishness, our arrogance, and our addictions. And God keeps loving us back to life over and over.”

What Jesus shows us in this wilderness experience is that humanity has a new goal—not a life of self-centeredness, but a life of God-centeredness; not a life of self-serving, but a life of self-giving. This is the fruit that makes our soul to thrive, that keeps our dying faith alive. This is how Jesus Christ becomes the apple tree.