

“Returning to the Earth”

Valley Presbyterian Church – October 12, 2026

2nd Sunday in Season of Creation

Psalm 139:7-12

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Genesis 3:8-19

Introduction

In Genesis 3 – the continuation of the Bible’s second tale of creation – we hear what is commonly known as “The Fall,” the basis of popular literature from *East of Eden* to *Paradise Lost*. This story has been pivotal to Christian thinking about the origin, nature, and consequences of guilt and sin. And as a result of eating of the forbidden fruit, the man and woman exit for good from the lush garden into which they had been formed.

Immediately preceding the crafty serpent’s entrance into the story, we learn about the man and woman that, “the two of them were naked, the human and his wife, but they were not ashamed.” (2:25) The Hebrew words for crafty and naked sound almost exact. The humans were not ashamed to be so exposed, they were comfortable in their own skin. They had no reason to hide from God or from each other. But all that was about to change.

The serpent’s opening question casts doubt on the goodness of God. To the woman, the serpent asks, “Did God say, You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?” (3:1) The you here is plural, it applies to both the man and woman. What God had said is that they could eat from any tree but one. God had generously provided all they could possibly need. But the serpent framed the gift negatively – God had not allowed them to eat anything they wanted to eat.¹

Our reading resumes after the man and woman have eaten of the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, in direct violation to God’s command. Subsequently, their eyes are opened to the fact they are both naked and afraid, and so they clothe themselves with fig leaves and attempt to hide themselves from God.

¹ Camen Joy Imes, *Being God’s Image: Why Creation Still Matters*, p. 50

Read Genesis 3:8-19

The couple hears the sound of God walking in the garden in the coolness of the evening breeze – the same wind, spirit, or life-force that was breathed into the *Adam* at the moment of the creation. This little detail speaks of intimacy: of a God that is present with, and walks on the same ground as, God’s people. God’s presence, though, can be a mixed blessing: serving as a source of comfort, but also – and particularly in this account – as an ominous reminder that despite their best attempts, the man and woman in this garden can’t, even if they try, hide from God.

As soon as God asks the man and woman why they are hiding and clothed, the cycle of blame begins. In blaming the woman, *Adam* indirectly blames God for making and placing in the garden the companion who gave him the fruit to eat. Blame passes on from one to another as the woman, instead of taking responsibility, blames the serpent who tricked her. Both their responses reflect the human inclination to evade personal accountability by pointing to outside influence. Here we are reminded of the all-too-human tendency to find a scapegoat when things go awry.

This increased knowledge associated with the man and the woman eating from the tree of knowledge leads to the recognition of their vulnerability. As William Brown says, “By partaking from the tree, the couple gained a level of self-consciousness, an awareness of their vulnerable condition, and of their newly acquired ability to make decisions of their own. Unwittingly, in their choice to (try to) become fully divine, they became fully human.”²

However, being or becoming a responsible and mature human being also implies taking responsibility for one’s actions. Knowledge leads to freedom to act and to the capacity to control. It probes the question that has often accompanied human invention – whether it was at the dawn of the printing press or the nuclear bomb or artificial intelligence: is there any knowledge that comes at too high of a cost? Are there any appropriate boundaries to innovation that ought to be set, even if we could know more?

The warning about taking the mysteries of God (life, knowledge) in our own hands is directly related to oppressive social relationships and to authoritarian and hierarchical ways of organizing life. The woman’s relationship with creation – and that of her offspring – is now marked with hostility. Her ability to fill the earth will be

² As quoted by Juliana Claasens in *WorkingPreacher.com*

marked by distress in conception and pain in childbirth. Her partnership with her husband is fractured so that her longing for his support is met instead with domination, impeding their capacity to partner to do God's work. Likewise, man's ability to produce food is described as being marked by the pain of thorns and thistles and he will be faced with his own mortality. Daily he will work the ground he came from and to which he will return when he dies. Our fractured relationship with God, each other, and the earth will forever cripple our vocational effectiveness and diminish the glory we reflect to the world.

It is all-too-easy for us to see how human warfare, greed, and exploitation continue to violate the intended beauty of God's world. In the race for profit and control, humans take what they want without thinking about sustainability. Because they lack the same protections of those with power, the poorest communities suffer most of the effects of environmental degradation. You'll never see junk yards or massive strip-mining projects located next to high-rent neighborhoods. I remember my first mission trip to Appalachia and how the run-off from bare mountains left by coal companies had devastated the towns and the lives of their inhabitants below.

We conveniently attribute human cruelty, neglect, and short-sightedness to our "fallen" condition. Because of this so-called "original" sin, God kicked us out of the garden and doomed us to toil, pain, violence, wrath, and greed. But what if we try to shed the notion that story of the "Fall" is about sin and shame; and instead try on the idea that gaining the knowledge given by eating from the forbidden tree allows humanity to differentiate themselves from the rest of nature; that we are not, or should not be, ruled simply by animal instincts but require knowledge and understanding for stewardship and care of creation.³

What is being described in this story is a loss of mutual trust between God and humanity. When we have something to hide, God's presence can become a threat rather than a comfort. Still, in Genesis 3, we are reminded of God's continual presence with the fearing and vulnerable human beings in this story. The text suggests that God will continue to walk with people and engage with them as they learn to become the responsible, caring adults they are meant to be.

Old Testament scholar Lyn Bechtel challenges the traditional view of reading this story in terms of the "Fall" by seeing it, instead, as a story of human maturation;

³ Melinda Quivek in *WorkingPreacher.com*

as the man and woman in the garden move beyond a childlike state of naivety, their loss of innocence associated with growing up – or “falling upwards,” as she puts it – and facing the realities of life in a complex world. This ancient coming-of-age story therefore reflects the importance of humans embracing their roles as adults who are prepared to take responsibility for their actions as well as for those around them.⁴

Thus, God’s justice here is not merely punitive, but aims to guide and shape the ongoing creation process toward greater harmony and fulfillment. Figuring out how to safely house and adequately feed people and produce efficient energy in a changing climate requires effort and innovation. Learning how to cure and prevent disease necessitates research. Overcoming the ancient sins of patriarchy and xenophobia and using violence as a state-sanctioned tool of fear and control requires a commitment to compassion. And in order to better understand and welcome people of other cultures, nations, languages, and faith traditions, we must improve our abilities to listen and communicate with mercy.

In this sense, being sent out from the garden is not merely punishment for the human sin of disobedience; it is the path to fulfilling our God-given, human purpose of tending the earth well. Along the way, we make many mistakes – and we fall into old habits of blaming the other people or outside factors for our own shortcomings – but we still all retain within us and have the ability to reflect to the world the image of our creator.

This is the God who – despite the serpent’s framing – has provided us with a world of abundant resources and nearly endless possibilities. In community, and with God who walks among us like in the coolness of the evening breeze, we can continue to mature in our faith and in the way we live into our calling as stewards of life. And through Christ, the one who was sent to walk among us as one of us, we claim our connection to God and one another as those made to bear God’s love to a beautiful, but hurting world. Amen.

⁴ As referenced by Claasens