

Sometimes I have trouble figuring out what a brown bag item is. We're in this season of "brown bag," remember, this season in which the preacher finds sermon inspiration in the random items -- the "brown bag items" -- you bring from home. And since, in my experience, church folk have some pretty unique stuff, sometimes I have trouble figuring out what a brown bag item is.

This week, I had trouble figuring out what our brown bag item *says*. This week, Ardis Chapman submitted our brown bag item: a cup, a mug, bearing an inscription in German. Now, my German is a little rusty (in that I've never ever studied it), so I asked Ardis to translate. And the gist is:

*Had Adam possessed Bavarian beer,
He would not have eaten the apple.*

(Apparently it's more lyrical in the original German.) *Had Adam possessed Bavarian beer, he would not have eaten the apple.* Thanks, Ardis. You all are killing me with these brown bag items this year.

But hey -- at least there's an obvious, go-to scripture to use as my starting point. Church... it's time to head back to the Garden of Eden.

[Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-13, 22-24]

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷ 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." ...

^{3:1} 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?'" ² The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³ 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.'" ⁴ But the serpent said to the

woman, “You will not die; ⁵ for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.

⁸ They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. ⁹ But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” ¹⁰ He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” ¹¹ He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” ¹² The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” ¹³ Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.” ...

²² Then the LORD God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” — ²³ therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴ He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

This story from these early chapters of Genesis is a story of a garden, of humans, of something we often call “the fall.” And frankly, it’s a “fall” that was just waiting to happen. God places humans in a lush garden and says: *eat from any tree -- oh wait, but not that tree* (and any parent knows that the first thing these shiny new humans will do the moment God’s back is turned is... eat from that tree). At the risk of blasphemy, here... Lord, you had to know that was coming.

Am I saying God is to blame? Not necessarily. But even if I were, I'm not the only one putting some of the blame on God here. After Adam & Eve eat this forbidden fruit, this fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they become aware of what they have done (and, apparently, aware of how naked they are), clothe themselves, and hide from God. While taking an evening stroll through the garden, God notices the humans are hiding, begins to think something's up, puts two and two together and says: *Did you eat from the tree when I told you not to eat from the tree?* Adam responds with his own version of the "blame game," saying: *Well, the woman... the one YOU gave me... so it's kind of your fault... and...*

God gets mad. Really mad. God banishes humans from the garden, stations a flaming-sword-wielding angel at the entrance, and (according to St. Augustine and a whole lot of church tradition, at least) transfers the sin and guilt of that first act of disobedience, automatically, to all human beings, for the rest of time. It's because of Eden that we're sinful, the logic goes.

Does the story raise some questions for you? It's no wonder. Why did God put the tree in there with them if they weren't supposed to touch it? Why didn't God put a gate around it, or make it somehow inaccessible? Why did God allow the snake in the garden in the first place? Why did God get so angry about what seems like a relatively minor act of disobedience (in comparison to the next chapter, where somebody actually murders somebody)? Where's God's forgiveness in this story (because "angel guarding the garden entrance with a flaming sword" doesn't sound terribly forgiving)? And if this really is the origin of sin for all humankind, how exactly does that sin transfer to the rest of us? I mean, I get that we're all sinful, but... is *that* really why?

Those are just a few of the questions that come to mind... but for the most part, they're the questions that come to mind if we take this story literally, historically. And to be honest, church... I'm not convinced that's the best way to read this story.

That, in itself, may sound a little sacrilegious to you... but I don't think it is. I don't think it's sinful or unfaithful to ask questions about how we should read a particular story of scripture. The Bible is a book of many books, a book of many genres, a book that includes parables and visions, right alongside poetry and hymns, right alongside histories and census data. Doesn't it make sense to read those different things... differently? (Even today, we read fairy tales differently than how-to manuals; we read novels differently than news reports. Genre matters.) It'd be absurd to read all of it as if it's all the same thing. So it's not sinful or unfaithful to ask whether we're meant to take a particular story literally. There's a difference, I think, between taking the Bible seriously and taking the Bible literally.

Still, it's not always easy to tell when we should read scripture literally and when we should read it more figuratively. It's not always easy to tell when the Bible is trying to communicate what happened (in a historical sense) and when it is trying to convey some deeper truth (through story, through parable, through metaphor). It's not always easy to tell when we should read a scripture literally... but I'm going to go out on a limb here and say when talking snakes show up, that might be a pretty good indication to go the "figurative" route. (Fair enough?) That might be a good time to scratch our heads, dig deep, and say, "what deeper truth is this story trying to convey?"

You might disagree. You might be thinking that the pastor's a faithless sinner and we should stage an intervention. It's your right to do so (the disagreeing, I mean -- I'm

not sitting through an intervention). It's your right to approach this book and read and interpret everything within it literally (though... good luck, because we're only up to Genesis 3 and -- spoiler alert! -- it is not going to get much clearer or easier from this point on). But if you're willing to suspend literalism or disbelief for a moment, go with me on this. What if this story isn't simply trying to report history? What if it's not meant to be read literally? What if it's designed to be read as story, so that it can convey some deeper truth? If that's even a little possible, it might be worth finding out what some of that "deeper truth" is.

To start, let's reconsider how we think of Adam & Eve... not, perhaps, as perfect superhumans who chose wickedness and fell from perfection... but rather as naive, childlike humans who were tricked into disobedience.¹ I mean, just read the story. They do something wrong, so their plan is... to hide? Then point the finger and take no responsibility for their actions? They sound immature, they sound childish.

And what's their big sin, their grand act of wickedness? Eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil? Why is *that* bad? Why wouldn't God want them to eat from that tree? Isn't it... good for humans to know the difference between good and evil?² (Isn't it, like, one of the main purposes of this book?) Unless... unless this isn't just a story about two people in a garden with some hocus-pocusy trees. Unless this isn't a story about how the first two sinful people made the rest of us sinful. Unless this is a story about who human beings are, not how human beings got that way. Unless this is a story about not just two people but *all* people, about God's people Israel, about even us.

Of this story, two of my go-to biblical scholars (Peter Enns and Jared Byas) write:

¹ Peter Enns and Jared Byas, *Genesis for Normal People: A Guide to the Most Controversial, Misunderstood, and Abused Book of the Bible*, 2nd ed. (B4NP, 2019), 53.

² Ibid., 54.

God didn't command Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because such knowledge is *wrong*. It's not that God didn't *ever* want Adam and Eve to know good and evil. That is precisely what he *did* want for them. *But they have to go about gaining such knowledge God's way.*³

Enter the crafty serpent, spouting some well-crafted half-truths. When the serpent questions Eve about the forbidden tree, she says that they can't eat of the tree, or else they'll die. The serpent responds by saying: *no, you won't die... you'll just become more like God, and God knows that, and God doesn't want that.* Our scholars continue:

A clever half-truth. Yes, if they eat of the tree they *will* be like God, *which is exactly what God wants*. Eventually. God wants his human creatures to look more and more like him, but the wise God must lead them in his way, in his time. ... The serpent tricked Adam and Eve into gaining wisdom too soon, apart from God's way. ... They should have just trusted their maker. The knowledge of good and evil isn't wrong, but getting it free from God's direction is death. Without the maturity that comes from obeying God, Adam and Eve *can't handle the truth* (said in our best Jack Nicholson *A Few Good Men* voice).⁴

Sorry, Ardis... but it doesn't seem like Adam was ready for the truth any more than he was ready for the Bavarian beer. He's... underage, so to speak. Not quite ready yet.

If we follow these scholars down this interpretive path (and I'd like to), then "this is the point of the story: the choice put before Adam and Eve is the same choice put before Israel every day: *learn to listen to God and follow in his ways and then -- only then -- will you live.*"⁵

This is the choice put not only before Adam and Eve, and not only before God's

³ Ibid., 55.

⁴ Ibid., 58-59.

⁵ Ibid., 59.

people Israel, but also before us, too. Follow God and walk in the ways that lead to life... or disobey and experience consequences. And are those “consequences” God’s retributive punishments against us? I don’t know. Maybe. But maybe... it’s that God knows the consequences of our choices better than we do, knows what’s best for us and what’s worst for us, knows what leads to life and what leads to destruction... and wants to guide us on better paths. Honestly, church... I’m beginning to wonder if this whole story is God jumping up and down, saying: *just TRUST me already, I know what’s best for you.*

Or it’s a literal story about two people who did something really bad and made all of us broken forever. You decide. For my part, I think the other reading is more meaningful, more transformational, smacks of more truth and sounds more like God.

I’m not a trusting person by nature. I’m guarded. Cautious. Controlling. Just a touch cynical. Maybe it’s not just me. Maybe humans aren’t trusting by nature. Maybe that’s why we need these reminders from God, again and again: *Trust me. I love you, I made you, I know what’s best for you. I know what you need and when you need it. I know you’re too broken to get it all right all on your own. I know you need guidance and grace and second chances. So follow me, walk in my ways, and trust me. Don’t sideline me. It’ll be better for you than if you try to go about things your own way. So trust me.*

Maybe this story is, in part, a reminder to trust. Church, I can’t promise I will be unfailingly successful... but it seems like a pretty good place for us to start.