



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Eve’s Big Bite”

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A sermon delivered October 20, 2013

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

*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.” Genesis 3:4-5*

*All men by nature desire knowledge. Aristotle*

*We have a hunger of the mind which asks for knowledge of all around us, and the more we gain, the more is our desire; the more we see, the more we are capable of seeing. Maria Mitchell*

*Whoever undertakes to set himself up as a judge of Truth and Knowledge is shipwrecked by the laughter of the gods. Albert Einstein*

### Sermon

The story of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden probably rates as the single most influential story in the western world. Much of that influence has not been good. It behooves us to, particularly its interpretations, uses, and abuses, even if you believe it’s ‘just’ a story.

Within the Book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible, there are two stories of God creating humankind. The tale we focus on this morning is the second account, which tells us, “In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up,” God formed *adamah*, a human being, from the dust or clay of the earth. A being without gender identity, not a man as many translations tell it. God placed this genderless human in Eden to serve the delightful garden, to keep it as steward, not master. God gave the human only one command: ‘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.’

Time eventually, God saw that the human needed a companion. So God made animals from the ground just as God had made the human, but none were a suitable helpmate. God then put the human to sleep and made a companion from the human’s rib. Not from earth as with the animals, but ‘bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,’ thus showing the oneness of their relationship. They also were of equal status, formed at the same time, becoming male and female at once. In Hebrew scripture, the words used are *ish* for man and *ishshah* for woman, a shift from the Hebrew word *adamah* signifying the pre-gendered human. With all characters now introduced, the real drama gets underway.

First we're told these two human characters are not ashamed of their nakedness, despite having no scales, fur, or feathers in the manner of the animals. Their nakedness is innocence, no knowledge of sexuality or anything else beyond the safety of God's domain, the Garden of Eden.

The author sets a serene, idyllic scene for us. All is good, all human needs are met. Can you feel the calm before the inevitable storm? How many movies have you seen where life is beautiful and happy when suddenly an evil monster jumps out and life is never the same? The sci-fi movie *Alien* serves as a prime example, but you can pick your own, I'm sure. Though the Bible isn't quite as scary as a Hollywood script, within Eden's utopia resides a crafty serpent ready to bring on the storm.

Picture Eve walking blissfully naked around God's garden when the serpent speaks, "Did God say 'You shall not eat from *any* tree in the garden?'" Now it knows perfectly well what God said. This is a challenge to Eve. She innocently replies, "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.'"

Dismissively, the sly serpent says, '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.'

Eve takes a moment. Perhaps for the first time she considers whether to obey God blindly or not. She judges that the tree is good for food and a delight to the eyes. She recognizes the tree is desirable for its power to make one wise and it might make her like God. What hubris, to want to be like God! A persistent human character flaw we suffer from still.

No surprise, Eve removes a fruit from the tree and bites. Then she hands the forbidden fruit to Adam who, without objection, eats, too.

Isn't this just like a human being? Every parent knows the irresistible temptation of a plate of cookies on a table. No child will wait until after dinner to eat what is freely available before. If God was all-powerful, able to create the cosmos, if God really wanted obedience, God wouldn't have created the tree of knowledge, put it in plain sight in the center of the garden, and then forbidden its fruits.

If this God was all-knowing and wanted obedience, God wouldn't have created humankind to be curious creatures able to make their own decisions. Nor would God have allowed a talking serpent to tempt Eve. But, if we believe the story as it's told, God, or the story's author, did all these things.

As you probably know, neither Adam nor Eve died. The serpent told the truth. Adam and Eve's eyes were opened and they became aware of their nakedness, their difference from the animals. After sewing fig leaf loincloths, they hid from God. But are they only hiding their nakedness? Might they be hiding their transgression, too, perhaps hoping to avoid punishment? Perhaps the nakedness they hope God won't see is the naked truth of their human agency and fallibility. Perhaps the clothes they sew are to hide their human imperfection.

But God sees what they've done and curses all three characters, though he only sends the humans out of the garden. To make sure they don't return God places a guard in front of Eden's gate. The journey of human life as we know it begins.

The story can be understood as a '*pourquoi*' genre, one that simply explains why life includes trial and tribulation, something few animals seem to know. It may also explain a feeling of spiritual separation from God or the Source of All.

Some claim the story symbolizes the development of sexual relations between the couple and their shame indicates knowledge of their sexuality. ‘Knowing’ someone in the Bible is a frequent euphemism for sex. Their sin or turning from God made them fully human.

For some, Eve represents all women. We are the unholy seductress and our women’s bodies are the true forbidden fruit that tempt men from spiritual purity and oneness with God. Similar interpretations by the 4<sup>th</sup> century theologian Augustine greatly influenced Christian and western ideas about women and the sinfulness of the physical body. Negative attitudes like these still haunt us today, as does the belief that the story serves as an argument prohibiting marriage by other than one man and one woman.

Augustine also maintained the idea of original sin—that because of Adam and Eve all humans are born in a state of sin. It is this sin that baptism and Jesus’ death save one from. This concept flies in the face of our First Unitarian Universalist Principle. We are not inherently sinful, but worthy even when we fail.

So what? Why does insight into this story matter for most of us who do not accept this story as a factual account or its cultural misuse? I believe we need to have knowledge about this story and its translations and various interpretations to aid in dismantling oppressions against women, gays, lesbians, and other gender identities.

I think it also can be useful when we consider our interest in returning the environment to a pristine, sustainable state. We are stewards of the planet and we have made it more hellish than heavenly. I wonder, when we see beauty in nature and pause to connect with the natural world, are we spiritually trying to return to the Garden and to a time we were not separated from our own holiness?

I often wish for simpler, uncomplicated times. The dysfunction in our government makes me wonder if they really know the difference between good and evil. They certainly exhibit hubris and over-reaching. I just hope they don’t collectively bring us all down with them.

Adam and Eve get wrongly blamed for making our lives full of suffering and pain. I don’t think they deserve it. It is human nature to be curious and explore. We want knowledge. And if everything were given to us too easily, we likely wouldn’t value it as much as we do. There would be little purpose to our lives. Death, for me, is a gift that makes life matter, even though I don’t want death to arrive anytime soon. Love would be less precious if there was no risk of losing it.

We know challenge helps us grow. Children must cut the apron strings and leave home. Being expelled from the safety of the garden was a gift that allowed us to experience all of life, its joys and sorrows.

Last night I attended Athens’ Economic Justice Coalition’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Justice Fest with members of this Fellowship. The keynote speaker, Janice Mathis of the Rainbow Push Coalition, included in her remarks that it should be a right to be free of ignorance. She believes knowledge and education should be guaranteed for all, no matter what their economic status and without the necessity of crippling loan payments. It is in our common interest for all people to be educated. We need to keep up the fight for knowledge which Eve began.

Our own Caryl Sundland received the Ray MacNair Lifetime Achievement Award from the EJC last night. In her brief remarks, Caryl said, “This is my life. I have to do this work.” All of us have work we can do to both recreate an environmental Eden and a little bit more heaven on earth. We may not want to completely return to the garden, but something approximating it wouldn’t be bad.

May this Fellowship and you who make up this covenantal community, continue to make this your work. As we journey down the road out of Eden, may your holy curiosity fill your spirit and give you strength to carry on. May it be so.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. What have been the costs and/or rewards of your seeking knowledge or following temptation?
2. What difficult choices have you made in life and what doors did these open or close for you?  
Please share.
3. What do you most want to know and what mystery are you most comfortable with? Explain.