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## “Womanish”

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1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent

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Genesis 2:15–17, 3:1–19

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“The woman whom you gave to be with me—SHE gave me fruit from the tree!”

Alice Walker derives her definition of Womanist, a black feminist, from the term womanish, from the black folk expression of mothers to their female children: “You actin’ womanish!” That is, like a *woman*. It usually refers to outrageous, audacious, courageous and *willful* behavior. The woman in this text embodies just such womanish tendencies.

Even if you are new to the church, you likely know this story well. It is a typical day in the garden that God has planted. Two bare bodies streak past a blur of lilies trumpeting God’s praise. They are duck under branches that are heavy with pregnant fruit. Their bare feet are stained purple with mulberries as they chase the shadows of dancing leaves from the canopy overhead. Maybe like little Mary Lennox in her secret garden, they have been following the robin around all morning like a tour guide, flitting here and there with eyes wide to take in the view. Or maybe they have been digging for hours, breathing in the smell of damp earth, making more and more room for God’s abundant life.

Whatever it is that is occupying their attention at the moment, out of the shadow slinks the serpent—the most cunning, the most crafty of all of God’s creatures. With his agitated tongue and mesmerizing eyes, he has them, at once, captivated. I don’t know what the serpent was thinking, but I wondered myself when God gave the command that you shall not eat the fruit of the tree, on the threat of death, whether the man and woman had any clue what that meant. After all, many of us go about our day-to-day lives without any intimation of our mortality.

My husband was a rather willful child, and when he was young, his parents urged him and commanded him not to cross the street by himself, on the threat of death! And it meant nothing to him! He would dash out anyway. Until one day, as he and his father were taking a walk around the neighborhood, when his dad spied in the distance an unfortunate squirrel in the middle of the road. So he took Ren by the hand and led him over to that flattened squirrel and said, “*This*, son, is what happens when you run in front of cars.” Well, suddenly it all made sense, and to this day, Ren is *still* rather anxious about crossing the street.

Had they *known* the threat of death, this would have been a different commandment. But I am not sure that they did, and so their entire obedience rests on their trust in God, rather than their fear of death. The only way that they would transgress would be if they began to doubt that God is to be trusted.

This is precisely what happens. The serpent, with his question, “Is it true that God told you not to eat from *any* tree in the garden?” makes God’s command seem extreme and unreasonable. The woman can only respond by correcting him, “We may eat from any of the trees in the garden, except for the one in the middle. We cannot eat it or even touch it!” Even her version of the commandment is severe, but then, she wasn’t around when it happened. If you missed that, do not let the lectionary fool you—we read the commandment to the man in the midst of the garden; this was before the woman was even created. We can presume at this point that she has heard about the command, probably from the man, but it was not firsthand.

Here, the serpent approaches her in particular. If there is any passing concern for this unknown, threatening death, the serpent wipes it away in an instant: “You will not die. No, for God knows that when you eat the fruit, your eyes will be opened, and you will be *like God*, knowing good and evil.” And that was enough. She looked at the tree, and there she saw that the fruit was pleasing to the sight and good for food, like every other tree in the garden that God planted. But this one stands out—it was to be desired to make one wise. If that is her motivation, to seek after wisdom, we can’t really fault her for that. The book of Proverbs spends 31 chapters urging anyone who will listen to seek after God’s wisdom! It is the core of the faithful life!

But she makes one mistake: she thinks that knowledge attained by humans is a substitute for divine wisdom and revelation. She thinks, in that moment, that wisdom can be sought apart from God. And that is something that we can have some compassion for. We live in a world that promises seemingly endless

information at the reach of our fingertips, a world where knowledge begets power and prestige. The mastery of technology, whether agricultural, medical, military, promises mastery of the world—safety and security, even escape from death. And so we chase after more and more knowledge to shore up our own security. We collect titles and letters to frame our names like ornaments, distinguishing us in a crowd. Do not mistake this as an argument for anti-intellectualism; that is not the case. But it is a warning to all of us.

This man and this woman seek wisdom in the wrong place. They eat it together, and it is far more bitter than they had expected. Even as the sweat is breaking out on their brows and their stomachs are beginning to churn, their eyes are opened and they *know*... that they are naked. I don't know about you, but I found this rather anti-climactic. *Where* is the knowledge of *Good* and *Evil*? They realize that they are naked, and the first enlightened act is to grab some fig leaves to make loin cloths for themselves! And as comic as that seems, isn't it also tragic that, in the depth of their despair, they reach for something so flimsy to comfort them?

The serpent promised that their eyes would be opened and they would be *like God*, but here it is precisely the opposite—their eyes have been opened, and they know exactly how *not like* God they are! They are vulnerable and exposed; they are human, frail, and finite. And they are seeking cover fast! But it is not enough. When they hear the sound of the Lord walking in the garden, they are frantic—even *entire trees* cannot cover up their shame. And just to be clear, the Lord is not taking an afternoon stroll in the breeze but *pacing back and forth*; the ground must have been quaking beneath them, each step growling like thunder in their ears.

Eventually they stand exposed, and their last-ditch effort at security is to blame one another. The man blames the woman, the woman blames the serpent... this is the result of trading trust and fidelity for knowledge and autonomy. This is Death. As far as death threatens to sever all of our relationships, it is creeping in even here. In this sense, it is difficult to tease out the consequences of their own actions from God's punishment. The woman blames the serpent, the serpent misled the woman... there is enmity there already. The woman gives the fruit to her husband, the man then blames her before God... there is enmity there already. God is pronouncing the reality that they have already created, the ways that they have ruptured their relationships with one another and the earth because they have betrayed the garden that God planted. They have betrayed God's love for them, and they have betrayed themselves in doing it.

God says you are dust and to dust you shall return. We are Presbyterian, with a pretty strong doctrine of original sin, and *this* is what we're talking about. We live in the residue of these ruptured relationships. This is our inheritance of the knowledge of good and evil. We glimpse the full depth of God's loving care for us, the beauty of trust and fidelity in relationship, and yet we also see how quickly it can be betrayed on impulse, how quickly it can be shattered, how fragile it is.

The good news today is that this is not the end of the story. At the end of the day, Death does not rule over us, and Dust does not have the final word. Because this woman, this *womanish* woman and her man, are created in the image of an outrageous, audacious, courageous and willful God who will not stand for it! This God, even in speaking the threat of death, is yet the God of life. This God, whose wisdom is foolishness to the world, has condescended to be with us in our miserable alienation. This God, who says "Did you eat of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" is the very same God who says, "Take, eat, this is my body broken for you." Thanks be to God.