



# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *What We Can Learn from the Creation Myth in Genesis*

### *“Part 5: The Snake”*

A St. Andrew’s Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
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**Scripture Reading:** Genesis 3:1-15 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

*But the snake was even more naked: the most cunning of all the animals that YHWH\* had made. The snake asked the woman, “Did God really tell you not to eat from the trees in the garden?” The woman answered the snake, “We may eat fruit from all the other trees in the garden. But of the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden, God said, ‘Don’t eat it and don’t touch it, or you will die.’”*

*The snake said to the woman, “Die? You won’t die! 5 God knows well that on the day that you eat it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil!”*

*The woman knew that the tree was enticing to the eye, and now saw that the fruit was good to eat—that it was desirable for the knowledge it could give.*

*So she took some of its fruit and ate it. She gave some also to the man beside her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. When they heard the sound of YHWH walking in the garden in the cool of the evening, the man and the woman hid from YHWH’s presence among the trees of the garden.*

*YHWH called to the man: “Where are you?” “I heard you walking in the garden,” replied the man. “I was afraid because I was naked, and I hid.” “Who told you of your nakedness? Have you eaten from the tree whose fruit I forbade you to eat?” The man replied, “It was the woman you put beside me; she gave me the fruit, and I ate it.” Then YHWH asked the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman replied, “The snake tempted me, so I ate.”*

*Then YHWH\* said to the snake, “Because you have done this, you are accursed: lower than the cattle, lower than the wild beasts, you will crawl on your belly and eat dust every day of your life. I will make you enemies of one another, you and the woman, your offspring and hers; Her offspring will wound you on the head, and you will wound hers in the heel.”*

\* YHWH represents the divine name found in the Hebrew text. It represents the Divine Mystery and, traditionally, is not pronounced. Instead, we say “God” or some other term of reverence.

## Sermon

I think that's pretty self-explanatory. *[laughter]* The question I would like you to keep in the back of your mind is: What possible use is this in my life?

In the modern world, with everything that's happening, why spend time looking at these ancient, clearly, myths? I love mythology, and I love the insights. I see it as a kind of cave diving into the human psyche.

When you think of God as we use the words "ineffable", "transcendent" and stuff, you can't really feel anything. But when you think of God who's walking through the Garden, crunching the leaves, saying, "Who told you that? Where are you?" ...

Again, a myth allows us to feel certain insights. And the insights are about human life, human perception. These stories occur around the world. I've mentioned before, there's a very similar story from North Africa, where there are two trees in a garden.

God sends a messenger animal to tell the humans to eat from the tree of life, not from the tree of death. The animal on the way says, "You know, this isn't working out for me. I think I'll tell them to eat from the tree of death, and then I'll get to eat from the tree of life and be eternal."

A lot of people in the ancient days thought snakes were eternal because they changed their skin. So we're going to look at it like that. Again, I do want you to think critically.

One of the reasons I get very uncomfortable, like with awards, titles, and things, is that really the one place you cannot teach the gospel is on a pedestal. Once somebody accepts you as an authority, they're useless in terms of teaching wisdom.

It needs to be a friend, an equal, who you feel can walk through, that you trust enough to go internally and see what's there, so that it's your wisdom. One of the things that makes me very happy over the years is very seldom has anybody ever said, "I've never heard that before. I've never thought of that before."

Typically, what people say is, "I've believed this my whole life, but I've never heard it said." What I want to do is help people articulate their own wisdom. My wisdom isn't going to do you any good whatsoever.

So when we do the little cake thing... Afterwards, not to kill the buzz... *[laughter]* but this is something we share as a community. I really can't explain that to other ministers. Had I been in any other community that I know of, I would have been fired over the years.

So this is *our* award, and I'll even... The cake. The cake is ours. I hope you feel that and know that.

This is a really remarkable community.

One of the things that makes it remarkable is I know that you're not just taking my word for things. You're planting seeds, and you're keeping your critical faculties intact and saying, "Does this work for me or not?"

We live in such a cruel and stupid time. My mom always said, "Don't use the word stupid," but I've exhausted my vocabulary *[laughter]* in terms of alternatives. I remember Doctors Without Borders. Now with RFK, it's Doctors Without Diplomas. *[laughter]*

You have an entire group of people... If they can find one person doing mischief on the other side, that justifies everything that they want to do. The *horrible* subhuman things they've said about Somalis.

I could be mistaken, but I think if this was 50 years ago, the Republican Party would call for impeachment. Because it used to have an integrity that seems to have been weaned out. It looks like that's changing, which is wonderful.

I don't care if you're a Republican or a Democrat, but I do care if you're fascist. That bothers me.

If you believe one person should be calling all the shots, if you think the truth is whatever that one person says, you think goodness is whatever that person says, including killing people without due process and stealing oil, then I think you shouldn't feel comfortable in a church.

You need to feel the violence you're doing against other people. Loving the oppressed and the oppressor... We love both, but it's a different kind of love. So we're going to go into human psyche. The worst thing we can do is think that we're above all of that.

We have to realize that we're all primates here. We screened you when you came in. Primates only. *[laughter]* So it's incredibly important not to think we're hovering above the issues. That's going to be one of the lessons that we'll learn with this story.



The story opens up with what sounds like, what most of us were taught in the United States, the story is about. If you look at the actual story, there is no Satan there. There's no devil. It's a snake.

I don't think there's a flamingo there. *[laughter]* It's probably a fig tree, not an apple tree. But that's the way that we're taught the story. It's a lot richer than that.

The story starts off talking about the snake being the craftiest... The translation is horrible that we have in our book. It's "the most naked," is the translation. But think about what you feel like when a snake comes near.

Now, some of you may love snakes and stuff, but a lot of us get nervous with snakes. There's almost something instinctual, it seems, of discomfort. That's what they're playing off of here.

Snakes were very mysterious in the ancient world because they would go down underground and come back up again. So they seemed to live in two different worlds.

The snake has a forked tongue. In the ancient world, that was often sign of dualism. So it's talking about when human consciousness learns how to speak, it falls into a trance because the Universe does not divide up into nouns and verbs.

And once we start thinking of the world like that, we fall out of it. We fall out of the ambiguity of nature and into an artificial world. The image of Satan as a symbol: cloven hooves, the fork thing. Again, dualism.

There are two trees in the Garden. See, Reverend Babs doesn't want to hear this. *[laughter]* Sorry. You think after all this time, I could let a cheap shot go, but I just... *[laughter]*

The two trees. In the story, they're going to get both trees. But that term "forbidden fruit" meant that tree wasn't ready to eat yet. It was protected until the fruit was mature.

If you haven't eaten from the tree of life... Eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which is your judgments about the world, "I like this, I don't like that," can pull you out of the Garden very quickly.

Life is a bundle with what we like and what we don't like. And we try to manufacture it where it only has the comfortable things. We wind up being alienated from our own roots.

Think of the powerlessness you feel when you look at politics today. And realize that a lot of that is that you're so lost in your judgments, we are so lost in our judgments, that we forget that we're alive.

We forget the miracle of being here in the first place. We forget there are people who love us and who we love. And that's our real life.

We have a duty to oppose injustice. But if we're not careful, we'll let injustice suffocate the joy of living. Those are your roots, and the roots of life are strong enough to stand up to what we're going through now.

Again, as I've said so many times, most human beings have lived in times of a bully. Democracy was an attempt to live without a bully, but that didn't work for us. We may get it back, but we don't have to be miserable.

We do have to work for justice. We have to love. But what a shame... Do you realize in addition to your social self, you're also the web of life? Your story includes evolution. Your body has a story that goes back to the beginning of time. And the elemental aspects of your body are cosmic.

Those are your roots, and they're definitely profound enough and deep enough to feel peace and joy and still work for justice in your time.

Let's see, where am I on my outline? Yes, let's go to the next one. Okay.



Has it ever seemed strange to you that the punishment of the snake is that it has to crawl on its belly? How do snakes get around? Did they have a pogo stick? [laughter]

I believe that the snake in question was a messenger animal. Remember in the ancient world, the angels and things were usually animals. They weren't...Swedish women in nighties. [laughter]

That's why the animal... When angels would show up, they'd always say, "Fear not." You know?

But in the ancient story, a messenger animal was sent to the human being, saying, "Choose life. Do not get lost in the tree of judgment." It had wings, which apparently in this story, it lost.

Again, it's a myth. It's a story. It's a wisdom that's being put in a little parable. If the first dualism is good versus evil, and it's never that simple, the second is life and death.

Everything that's alive has come from something that's died. Everything you've eaten is something that had to die so you would have life. The snake also represents that kind of shapeshifting life. It's like a river.

One of the most important wisdoms we can have is letting go of the forms of life and knowing that our home is in the flow. We don't like that. We're much more secure with the nouns and verbs.

But if we can say yes to life, even as it changes form, even as it takes us and everyone we care about into a new form, then we can be safe through change.

So that's the second idea. That life and death is a kind of a dualism. You are part of a larger life. And the more you can love the life around you, the less your fear of death will haunt you.

Again, what a shame that the Universe has taken so long to bring you into being. And to let anything anybody does rob you of your joy, and your genius, and the gift that you have to give.

Last thing, and that's the dualism of fear and desire. Can we go to... This image of the snake around a stick or a tree.

Let's go to the next one, too. And you know that the two snakes is the medical thing.



In the ancient world, it was always like three and a half times around the stick which is how you know they're trying to speak symbolically. For some people, the stick was the spine and the snake was the energy.

One of my favorite readings of any scripture in the world says that the human mind is like a placid lake that's naturally peaceful unless it's disturbed by one of two winds: the wind of desire or the wind of fear.

And those are seen as two sides of one coin. When you look at the world and you despair, that's letting fear disturb. I don't think there's anybody still in the church that lets the false entitlements of MAGA fool them.

But if you ever choose property or money over human beings, it will destroy your peace of mind. So that idea, that when you are disturbed... When you look at the world and it breaks your heart...

To know the peace you're looking for is not getting what you desire and avoiding what you fear. It's finding the balance between those. And know that that's a peace that can't be disturbed by what happens. That's beyond fate.

So what does this story say to us today? Has this been worth your time? Or did I just cash in on another week? "Prove me wrong." That was Charlie Kirk's big thing. Make a preposterous claim and then say, "Prove me wrong."

The difference between good religion, good religion and bad religion, to me, one of them, is when people use things they don't understand to explain what they do understand. Heaven, hell, angels, devils, gods...

Or if you use what you understand to get a sense of trust in what you don't understand. So I think this image of the story of the Garden of Eden is meant to take a simple experience that we all have and make it cosmic.

And say whenever we see dualism, whenever we see good versus evil, to take a second to make sure we haven't gone crazy. Because that's the most likely thing that's happening. When everything is absolutely clear, you probably have lost discernment.

So at least to explore that... When it looks like good versus evil, and it certainly does in our day, to realize we're still human beings, and everybody in the game is. So we may have to make some very unpleasant decisions, but we don't have to hate anyone.

Then the second thing is to try to get beyond the dualism of life and death, to realize that we all belong to a larger life. Every one of us comes to an end in terms of our personal story.

But what these ancient myths are telling us is that's not all we are. Life is expressing itself through us. And when we choose life over our own separate egos, something beautiful and wonderful comes into the world.

And then finally, to realize that it's our nature. It's evolved in us to have desire and fear. And most of the time, that's what makes life worth living.

But when we're off balance, to realize we need to seek out that still spot between those two. And realize if we can build our peace there, that we carry paradise within us.

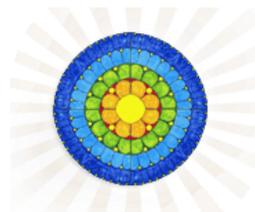
So that's my understanding of the text. The best I can do. We're going to take a minute now for you to think how you would have preached it.

## Benediction

### Rev. Erica Knisely

We are being called to move past our judgments into a deeper wisdom. May we reconnect with the life that is all around us and within us and celebrate the gift of being alive. Go with the love of the one from whom you came, the one who walks alongside you all of your days, and the love that dances inside of you. Go in peace. Amen.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*



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