

Gen. 2:15–17; 3:1–7

Ps. 32

Rom. 5:12–19

Matt. 4:1–11

Our Limited Freedom

**Goal for
the Session**

In the creation story, adults will hear God’s commands and identify what these commands mean for their lives.

■ P R E P A R I N G F O R T H E S E S S I O N

Focus on Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7

WHAT is important to know?

—From “Exegetical Perspective” by Judy Fentress-Williams

The serpent’s question is an invitation to question the command of God. The serpent responds with authority, first denying the consequences for trespassing the boundaries established by God and then redirecting Eve by offering an intriguing possibility. Eating of the tree will result in their eyes being “opened.” Then they will be “like God, knowing good and evil” (3:5). The opening of the eyes connotes a kind of seeing that is beyond the physical ability they already possess. It connotes perception and understanding, as does the word for knowing. The promise of the serpent could mean they will understand the difference between good and bad and/or they will have a broad range of experiences, both good and bad.

WHERE is God in these words?

—From “Theological Perspective” by William Joseph Danaher Jr.

The Genesis narrative offers a stark depiction of the advent of a sin-sick humanity looking for love in all the wrong places, helplessly yearning for health and wholeness. Augustine uses this perspective to emphasize the utter gratuity of God’s forgiveness and grace. Precisely because the decision to disobey God began in the will, it is the will that must be healed, and this healing can happen only through love. The will is not only the seat of all obedience, but the root of all love, and love alone can heal us—first, God’s transformative love working conversion in us, and then, our love returning to God, which is the end of all human striving and the source of true fulfillment.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

—From “Pastoral Perspective” by Allen C. McSweeney Jr.

Read from a pastoral perspective, the story lends itself to an exploration of the role of human freedom within limits set by the wisdom and grace of God. The limits God sets to our freedom are not a matter of enforcing conformity to arbitrary rules. The *torah* of God is intended for the well-being of the “image-bearing creature” to whom God has entrusted the stewardship of creation. The flourishing of human life in a good and bountiful, but limited, creation requires both freedom and appropriate constraints on the exercise of that freedom.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

—From “Homiletical Perspective” by Jon L. Berquist

Even our nakedness becomes distracting, and we know wardrobes to cover our nakedness can also distract us. Human excuses for avoiding our mission may start in the garden, but we experience a full range of such excuses today that distract us from our mission. For people of faith, distraction may prove more frequently troublesome than temptation. We think of ourselves for a while, or we focus more on other humans than on God’s mission. With just a glance away, we start to wander from God’s mission. God’s mission has not changed, and in the aftermath of our stumbling, God still calls us back to the right path. God calls us back every day, and every Lent.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

**Genesis 2:15–17;
3:1–7**

Focus on Your Teaching

Most adults understand that the evil they experience is the result of what is often referred to as sin. However sin is defined, it results in hurting our relationships with other human beings, the planet, and its environment. Adults also know that they have the ability to do good. They know they are capable of following God’s command to care for creation and serve their neighbors. But they also recognize that they often disobey God’s commands, and this has negative results. Today’s session will help the participants explore what it means to live and serve as God’s children in the world.

Creator God, give me a spirit of wisdom and discernment as I lead this session. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- newsprint or board
- marker
- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- purple cloth or placemat
- pillar candle, lighter
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for the next session

For Responding

- option 1: newsprint or board, marker, paper, pens
- option 2: computer, projector, screen, paper, pens
- option 3: Resource Sheet 2, colored paper, scissors, markers, glue, old magazines, string

If open flames are not allowed in your building, use a battery-powered candle.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Greet participants as they arrive. Tell adults that this is the First Sunday in Lent as you spread the purple cloth or placemat in the center of your learning space. Place the candle on the cloth and light it. Pray this prayer or one of your choosing:

God of creation and new life, guide our discussion and open our eyes to see the truth about ourselves and you. Amen.

Ask participants to think of an example of “good” in the world and an example of “evil” in the world. Invite volunteers to tell their examples. Write the headings “good” and “evil” on the board or newsprint and ask participants to identify what they believe to be the cause(s) of both good and evil. Write these under the appropriate heading. (*In most cases human beings are the actors for both good and evil.*)

Introduce the session theme by saying that they will explore the role and limits of human beings as seen in the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden.

EXPLORING

Assign volunteers to read Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7 by taking the following parts: narrator, God, serpent, woman (Eve). Encourage people to read their parts dramatically.

Following the reading, ask the participants to review the focus text in their Bibles and name the two commands God gives first to the man (Adam) in 2:15–17. The first command is implied by “put him in the garden . . . to till and keep it.”

Have participants read Genesis 1:26–28 and compare it to 2:15. Then ask them to discuss:

- ✠ What role does God give humanity in these passages?
- ✠ How are these passages similar and how are they different?

Two independent creation stories, 1:1–2:4a and 2:4b–25, have been identified in Genesis. The first story uses the Hebrew name *Elohim* for God, while the second uses two names, *Yahweh Elohim*, translated Lord God.

- ✪ Is there a difference between “having dominion over” something or “caring for” something? If so, what?

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1. Invite a volunteer to read the “What?” excerpt aloud.

Ask the group:

- ✪ What “boundary” did God establish that the serpent invited the woman and the man to cross?
- ✪ What was Eve’s sin? Some may mention that her sin was questioning God, disobeying God, trying to be like God, or knowing all that God knows.
- ✪ Why do you think God would set such a boundary?

Tell the class that scholars disagree as to the exact significance the tree of knowledge held, but we do have the rest of the Bible, which offers clues about what God expects of humans. Have participants name some examples in the Bible of expectations or rules God gives humans. (Some Scriptures that may stimulate thought include Exodus 20:1–17, Leviticus 19:18, Micah 6:8, and Mark 12:28–31.)

According to Genesis 3:7, the direct consequence of disobeying God was that Eve and Adam realized they were naked. Ask:

- ✪ What do you think was the bigger consequence: Adam and Eve’s eyes were opened, or their relationship with God was changed? Why?

Have the participants read the “So What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. The writer speaks about “the role of human freedom within the limits set by the wisdom and grace of God.”

Discuss:

- ✪ Why does God set limits, and what is good about this?
- ✪ Why does God also grant human beings freedom?

Lead into Responding by having the participants consider their role in, as well as the limits and consequences of, taking care of the garden today.

**EASY
PREP**

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session.

- 1. I Am Responsible** To make this study more personal, the participants will consider their own responsibilities and how they fulfill them. On the board or a sheet of newsprint, write the phrase, “I am responsible for . . .” Give each participant a pen and paper. Ask them to complete this phrase by writing down as many answers as they can in one minute. Then have pairs or groups of three compare lists. Ask each person to evaluate how well he or she is doing with their lists and make a commitment to fulfilling their responsibilities in at least one particular area. If there is time, consider forming small groups of those with like interests so they can support each other through prayer and contact outside the class.

2. **Keeping the Earth** One responsibility that grows from the focus scripture is to care for God's creation. Have the participants watch a short film about global climate change. Consider one of the following options:
- ✧ From the United Church of Christ:
bit.ly/EnvironmentUCC
 - ✧ From National Geographic:
bit.ly/GlobalWarmingNG
bit.ly/GlobalWarmingNG2

After watching the movie, have the class work in groups of three or four. Give each group a piece of paper and pens. Ask each group to list ways they either have been practicing or could practice keeping (caring for) the earth. Have them also suggest one way their faith community could practice earth care in a meaningful way. After a few minutes, ask the groups to report. Have them identify one way they could practice responsible earth care as a group. Ask a volunteer to write about this decision to put in the church newsletter or on the church Web site to invite others to join them.

3. **Care Ads** Working with their hands, the participants may find their minds are freed for new thoughts. Provide copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Faithful Earth Care Ads) for each participant. Ask them to follow the instructions on the resource sheet. Provide the participants with a variety of items they can use to make their visual items. For example, provide colored paper, markers, glue, old magazines, and string. Encourage the participants to be creative. After participants have shown their visuals and discussed them, invite them to commit themselves to identify ways they can practice responsible earth care in their daily lives.

CLOSING

Light the candle, if necessary. Invite adults to focus on the flame as they pray silently for wisdom in being faithful stewards of creation. After a few moments of quiet, read aloud Psalm 32:1–7, from the psalm appointed for the First Sunday in Lent.

Form two groups to read the psalm aloud, alternating verses between groups.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for the next session, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

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Faithful Earth Care Ads

Take a moment to read the following quotes. Then choose one quote that is most meaningful to you. Using the items provided by your leader, create a poster or other visual item incorporating your quote. Think about how this quote and your visual item support the message of Genesis 2:15 that God entrusts human beings with the care and keeping of the earth.

“Treat the earth well: it was not given to you by your parents, it was loaned to you by your children. We do not inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children.”

Native American saying

“There are no passengers on spaceship earth. We are all crew.”

Marshall McLuhan

“Take care of the earth and she will take care of you.”

Unknown

“Christ has no body on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ’s compassion for the world is to look out; yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good; and yours are the hands with which He is to bless us now.”

Teresa of Avila