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Pushin' the Limits
Genesis 3
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I'm going to name a scenario, and you can discuss what happens next. You are driving in your car, and the sign on the road says Limit: 100 kilometres per hour. What do you set your cruise control at?

June 22, 1987, the government of Alberta mandated that all people in a moving vehicle had to wear a seatbelt. In the first few months, did you? Why or why not?

Too long ago to remember? How about this: You see a sign at the entrance to the grocery store: Please wear a face-mask. Did you/do you comply? Why or why not?

What these scenarios reveal is something that is as old as humanity itself, and it begins in the story of the Garden of Eden, a tree, a snake, and two people. There is at least a month's worth of sermons in this passage, but I want to focus on one theme in particular — limits. Where do we see limits, and reactions to them in this scripture?

So, the first question that I always wondered about was, "why is the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the garden when the people can't eat from it?" Why would he put a deliberately tasty, good looking fruit tree in reach of people and then tell them that they can't eat it? Even more cruel, it's a magical tree! It can open your mind so that you can see good and evil.

It must be a test, we cry! I would have passed it, others of us say. This is why I refuse to eat apples, is a third response.

What was your first thought about why God put this tree in the garden? How you react to that question might say a lot about who you believe God to be.

What if it is the simple fact that the garden is God's, not ours? In God's garden, there are things that God loves, and can safely use, but that are dangerous to humans. Like electrical outlets in a home with babies. So, God puts a limit on the people. Don't do this, he says.

The reason for the limitation is exactly what the serpent keys in on. God is really just holding out on you. But, if you eat this, then the next time you meet God in the garden, it will be as equals, not as servants. You can decide what is good for you.

And so people eat the fruit. Remember, everything that they have known in the past is goodness — good creation, good God, good food, good garden, *good limitations?*

All they really gain is the knowledge of evil, and the shame that they will never actually be like God. It is an awful transaction. They thought that they could safely walk past the limitation, and instead found out that it was there for their own good.

Then we get to the consequences.

The serpent is cursed. The land is cursed. The woman gets pain in childbirth, and a ruler over her. The man gets futile effort and toil to eat. And finally, they die.

What are these? Are they punishment? Curses?

Again, what is your initial response to this question? Why does God respond this way?

Is God an angry God that is mad because humanity has messed up his creation, and so he wants revenge? Is God so weak that humanity forces his hand to punish against his loving nature, because we choose not to follow the limitations?

Or, is God good? And are these actions for the good of creation? What if they are actually disciplines, or better yet, limitations, rather than punishment?

Let's look at them.

The serpent is cursed, his mouth is full of dust, and he crawls on the ground. The one who used his guile and cunning to destroy the trust between God and humanity can no longer speak, and is no longer trusted enough to listen to. God limits the serpent's influence on creation.

The woman is not cursed. But she has tried to become a god to rival YHWH. And so, at the very moment where woman most reflects the creator, when she brings life into the world, she is forced to call on the true God to preserve her very life. Her will for independence from God is limited by the need for protection, provision, and strength that is put on her.

And she also is driven to her partner. This takes a little more explaining.

The hebrew term is ezer k'negdo. It means helper fit for, and it shows up in chapter two. An ezer k'negdo is supposed to be a rescuer, a helper, one who will confront failure, a partner. We know this because this is the term used to describe God doing all of these things for Israel in other places of the bible. So the woman is created to be an ezer k'negdo for the man, and by implication, he is her ezer k'negdo as well. That is why the poem, bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh is so compelling. There is no hierarchy here, no rank and status, only ezer k'negdo, helper fit for.

Then, they get into crisis. When the woman is being confronted by the serpent, where is her ezer k'negdo? Right there with her, but silent. He says nothing! He fails to confront, help, or rescue.

And when he is being confronted by the judge of all creation, where is his ezer k'negdo? She is silent! She says nothing! She fails to confront or partner.

But it still remains that being alone, being independent is not good. Humans still need an ezer k'negdo, a helper fit for, in their lives. And so, when their relationship is at the lowest possible pace, when shame and hurt threaten to divide them and separate them, God puts into place a limitation that will drive them back together. She will desire him. He will have to rule her — remember, "rule" here is how they were to care for the garden. This is not to tower over her, to threaten and dominate her, to use her up for selfish gain. This rule means to serve and protect her, to treat her as God's precious garden, to help her to flourish through care and provision. Ahh, how we have twisted Genesis into meanings it was never intended for!

When independence threatens, God puts a limit on women and men to draw them back together. At best, created intent is ezer k'negdo, at worst, the limit is desire and rule. This prevents the truly not good state of alone.

Slide 5: Limits are good.

Next, the man. He, too, is not cursed. But at the moment of his life, where he is most reflective of the creator by making the ground flourish with life, his efforts will be frustrated, his work will produce twisted results, so he is forced to acknowledge that he, too, is not God. Only with the true God can he survive, can he provide for himself and others in his care.

Not all is well, though. The very ground is cursed because of what humanity chose to do, and it no longer flourishes with life effortlessly, as God intended it to do. God does not magically create something else to cover the shame of his humans, but creation itself has to pay a price to cover their nakedness. Death has been let loose in creation, and it will take the ultimate act of God to prevent its explosion from undoing all that he did in making creation amazing.

Finally, humanity is given one final limitation — they no longer live forever. They cannot taste from the tree of life. Why?

By now, we should be anticipating that God's reasoning is for good, not to be vengeful or punitive. He is already working to restore creation here.

If humanity can now choose between good and evil, yet do not have the wit to choose wisely, God, in his mercy, limits our influence. We will not have unlimited access to God's creation to harm and destroy. He gives us a limit on our effect on each other, and on creation.

Reading Genesis three this way, and actually throughout scripture, we begin to see the benefits of limitations as one of the gifts that God has given to us.

It means that Christians are not the cheating people, the lying people, the selfish people, the abuse your spouse or kid or neighbour people. Christians are not the me-first people, the greedy people, or the mocking people. Instead, we are the generous people, the caring people, the empathetic thinking-of-others people. We are the humble people, the servant people, the give-you-the-shirt-off-our-backs, salt-of-the-earth people. The people-you-can-trust-at-their-word people.

I wonder, though, how our real lives hold up under the scrutiny of accepting limitations? The examples that we started with were somewhat tongue in cheek, but are we really willing to accept limits for nothing but the sake of someone else?

Read with me in Romans 14.

Verse 7: For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone.

We all exist in society. We can't escape it. No one is an island.

Verse 13 and 15: Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died.

Remember, in John, Jesus gave us one command: Love one another. We have one job.

Verse 19: Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food.

During this pandemic, we were asked to accept limitations on our daily routines. Some of them were severe, others less so. For those of us with the privilege of being able to travel, we were asked to quarantine for 14 days. We cannot travel to the US. We shop only for necessities. Homeschool our kids. Wear masks. Use hand sanitizer.

Not to protect ourselves. To protect others. Those who stock the grocery shelves and man the tills. Who clean the floors and change the beds and wash the dishes.

When judged in light of Romans 14, how did we do?

I've seen two distinct reactions. I've seen employees yelled at, argued with, and shamed for asking that customers follow provincial guidelines and wear a mask, and use hand sanitizer. On the other hand, I've seen a group of over 20 people gather on our church lawn to pray, without a single complaint over six feet and mask wearing.

Friends, in a few weeks, we are looking at trying an in person service. There are many in our community for whom the thought of in person gatherings is incredibly risky, whether the government has allowed them or not. We are going to be asking you to accept some limitations. We will not be singing. We will all be wearing masks. We will be social distancing.

We will be doing this because it is not good for people to be alone. Because we want people to feel welcome in our building, with the church. I wonder, will we have people challenge us at the door, as we offer a mask to those who forgot? Or will we as a community accept limitations with joy and grace, because it means that someone else might feel free to join us?

These are real questions, that need answers. How the world sees the church, and Jesus, depends on how willing we are to admit that limitations are actually a gift, not a punishment. How the world sees the church and Jesus depends on how willing we are to do our best for someone else, ahead of our own desires.

So that God is glorified.

I'm in. Who is with me?