

When God finished creating all the animals, birds, reptiles and bugs,
God looked at them all and said, "That's GOOD."

ALL of them "good." No exceptions . . . even the serpent.

Is there anybody here this morning who really enjoys snakes—really LIKES them?

If you have positive feelings toward snakes, you're very unusual.

Most of us fear snakes. We find them repulsive.

We hate the way they move, the way they slither along the ground.

But before Genesis 3, snakes—serpents—were different.

We're not exactly sure HOW they were different, but they were NOT repulsive.

They did not slither. And they talked.

Perhaps—in this time BEFORE sin ruined things—
perhaps ALL animals could talk with humans.

The serpent of Genesis 3 is described as one of the wild creatures God made.

Not a god. Nothing special. No magical powers—just another wild creature,
just another example of God's "good" creation.

Now when you look at all the animals God made,

it's clear that God has a marvelous imagination—AND a sense of humor.

There's the long-necked giraffe,

the flamingo that stands on one skinny leg,

and the platypus with fur on its body and the bill of a duck.

Each animal has characteristics that set it apart from every other animal:

The cheetah runs with the most speed.

The owl flies with the quietest wings.

The wolverine is the most ferocious.

The pack rat is the most possessive.

The chimpanzee is the most inventive.

And the serpent—BEFORE anything bad happened to change its shape and its
reputation—the serpent was the most . . . do you know what?

In the old KJV, it says in Gen. 3:1 that the serpent was more "subtle" than any
other animal. Most modern versions use the word "**crafty**."

"Subtle" or "crafty" makes us think of this original serpent as a sneak,
as a trickster, as an evil, underhanded manipulator.

I know why English translators picked the word “crafty.”

The serpent DID cause Eve to sin. The serpent DID come to embody evil.
But that’s NOT the word in Gen. 3:1.

Here’s the verse: “And the serpent was more _____
than any of the other animals God had made.”

The Hebrew word in that blank is found a number of other places in the OT,
especially in the book of Proverbs.

And EVERY time that word is used in Proverbs,
it’s a POSITIVE word, a word describing a POSITIVE virtue
that God wants all of us to have.

Here’s one of the verses from Proverbs that contains the key word:

It’s from Prov. 12:16—*“A fool shows his annoyance at once,
but a prudent man overlooks an insult.”*

Which word in THAT verse is the one used in Genesis to describe the serpent?

The word is “prudent.”

The word in Genesis 3 is EXACTLY the same word found in that Proverbs
verse -- the serpent was more “prudent” than any other animal.

Here are 2 more examples of how that word is used in Proverbs:

From Prov. 14:8 – *“The wisdom of the prudent is to give thought to their
ways, but the folly of fools is deception.”*

And yet another, from Prov. 14:15 – *“A simple man believes anything,
but a prudent man gives thought to his steps.”*

In every case in the book of Proverbs, “prudence” is a positive virtue.

And surprisingly—shockingly, even—it’s that very same Hebrew word
that is used to describe the serpent in Genesis 3.

So perhaps the other wild animals God made had a little prudence,
some prudence, a dose of prudence,
but the serpent was MORE prudent than all the rest.

Just as the cheetah had the most speed and the pack rat was the most possessive,
the serpent—however it looked in its pre-sin days—
was the most prudent of all the animals.

Not demonic, not full of wild-eyed evil, not tricky, not crafty, not manipulative,
but prudent—really, extremely, exceedingly prudent.

So what is prudence ? My dictionary says that a prudent person is one who is
“wisely cautious in practical affairs.” That’s a GOOD thing—a GOOD quality.

Prudence means that you look before you leap.

Prudence means that you don’t take unnecessary chances.

Prudence means that you minimize your risks,
that you move slowly and study carefully.

Prudence means that you try to keep your life under control.

The book of Proverbs is exactly right: prudence is a virtue.

If your life is totally out of control,

if you’re a compulsive risk-taker,

if you always act first and think later,

if you never think about the future costs of present behavior,

then you need MORE prudence—perhaps a LOT more prudence.

So if you’re one of those folks who needs MORE prudence,

you probably should NOT listen to the rest of my sermon.

Please—just tune me out.

The problem with the serpent, you see, was that it had too much prudence.

The serpent had an excess of prudence.

The serpent was the MOST prudent of all the animals.

The serpent was SO prudent that its virtue became a vice.

An EXCESS of prudence is sin.

And if you think about it, perhaps MOST sin is exaggerated virtue--

a good quality run amuck, too much of a good thing.

A little salt is good, but too much is bad.

Same with exercise—with work—with play—with ice cream.

SOME is good, but an excess of ANYTHING good becomes a problem.

A life gets out of balance when one quality, one tendency,

one way of operating in the world takes over,

becomes our compulsion, and dominates everything else.

The serpent was dangerous because it had a prudence overdose.

So how can you recognize a prudence overdose?

How do you diagnose it in yourself?

The sign of a prudence overdose is a life compulsively fixated on safety, security, sameness, predictability, and control.

The overly prudent person wants to KNOW all things and CONTROL all things so as to stay safe, secure, comfortable, independent, and in control.

For the overly prudent, the greatest fear is fear of the unknown; and the #1 goal in life is to avoid all risk.

The serpent, the most prudent animal, offered the woman **control**—the control that comes with knowledge.

The serpent said something like this to Eve:

“You see, Eve, right now there are huge gaps in your knowledge. There are details, facts, and mysteries about life that God knows that you don’t know.

How can you control your life if you don’t know all the things God knows?

How can you be safe with these huge holes in your knowledge?

How can you survive if you’re not in control of every detail?

Your limited knowledge isn’t safe! It isn’t wise! It isn’t necessary!

It isn’t prudent!

So eat this fruit—become like God—know what you need to know to be wise—to be safe—to be in control.”

And Eve ate what the serpent offered her.

Why did she do it?

Was it because she was a reckless, illogical risk-taker?

No. Absolutely NOT. Exactly the opposite, in fact.

Eve ate because she wanted control; she wanted safety;

she wanted the security that comes with absolute knowledge.

She ate, not because she was a loose, wild-eyed liberal,

but because she was a too-cautious conservative.

The extremely prudent serpent hooked Eve’s fears, and in her fear she grabbed desperately for more safety, for more security.

As I said before, there may be some among us who need to hear a sermon about being a bit MORE prudent,

but the majority of us probably need the message of Genesis 3.

It's a warning about a prudence overdose.

It's a call to say "no" to the fear that leads us to strive for total control.

You've all heard the voice—either from inside your own head,

or from someone else—that voice which tells you,

"If you just knew a little more, you'd feel secure.

If you just HAD a little more, you could relax.

If you stay in the box and build the walls high enough, you'll be safe.

Don't take a chance; people won't understand; you might fail."

Now please hear me: Not every risk should be taken.

You DO need some prudence. Some risks ARE stupid or dangerous.

Please don't blow your next paycheck on the lottery or

go jump off a bridge because Pastor Weldon said

that sometimes we're too prudent. PLEASE don't!

But this story DOES let us know that sometimes, SOMETIMES the voice telling you NOT to take the risk is the voice of the overly-prudent serpent.

The overly prudent serpent says, *"Don't go into Voluntary Service; don't do a term with MCC—it's too risky—you'll get behind on your career. It'll hurt you financially."*

The overly prudent serpent says, *"Don't tell the pastors you'd really like to try preaching a sermon sometime. If it goes badly, you'll look like a fool, and if it goes well, people will start pushing you to seminary. And that will REALLY goof up your life."*

The overly prudent serpent says, *"You may be unfulfilled in your present job, but at least the boredom is familiar. Stay in the rut—it's safer."*

The overly prudent serpent says to Faith Mennonite Church, *"Don't develop any new S.S. classes. Don't change your administrative structure. Don't do anything out of the box in worship. Don't try any new mission projects. Don't tamper with small groups. Play it safe."*

Garth Brooks sings a wonderful song entitled *"Standing Outside the Fire."*

The word "fire" in the song stands for life—life fully lived, a life of strength, of risk, of courage.

The song says that lots of people are content to make safety their god, but Garth says that *"it's not enough just to stand outside the fire."*

And the key line of the song goes like this:

“Life is not tried, it is merely survived if you’re standing outside the fire.”

You see, most of us aim too low. Too often we’re content with mere survival. For most of us, our sin resides in our settledness, our wealth, our fear-driven grasping for safety and security.

We have the virtue of prudence—which is a GOOD thing—
but we are tempted to let prudence take over.

We’re not prudent with our prudence.

We’re tempted to allow it to grow out of control until prudence becomes a cancerous tumor, dominating and polluting our whole life.

And when that happens, when we make safety and security our god, when we stop risking, then we crawl into a safe hole, and we slowly die.

Admit it—EACH of you is thinking, “If I had been the one talking to the serpent that day in the garden, I would not have taken the forbidden fruit.

I would have said ‘no.’

I would have told the serpent where to go.”

But every day in OUR lives, we face that same temptation to let prudence be our god, and when that happens, the real God’s call to go, to grow, to risk, to try something new, gets buried.

The overly prudent serpent offered control, security.

And for that, God judged the serpent. God took the serpent’s control away.

God transformed the serpent into a belly-crawler and a dust-eater.

The serpent was changed from an attractive and influential animal into the lowest and most hated of animals.

And the woman—who gave in to the desire for total control over her life—also had her control taken away.

From now on she would find childbirth painful.

From now on her husband would tend to exercise control over her.

What she grasped, she lost.

And the man, who gave into the same temptation, also lost control.

His work with the ground would become difficult. There would be thistles and weeds.

No longer would he be able to control the earth.

None of these effects was God's desire.

None of them were part of God's plan.

All of these effects are the result of sin.

They all illustrate the truth that those who reach for the level of knowledge and control that belong only to God will find that they actually LOSE control.

Jesus said the same thing: *"If you try to save your life, you'll lose it."*

Those who make prudence into an idol will die.

Just as a drug overdose will kill the body, so will a prudence overdose kill the soul.

God calls you to step forward without always knowing where you're going,
to take the first step without knowing the last,
to give without knowing what you're going to get,
to trust instead of striving for control,
to share generously instead of keeping carefully,
to act radically instead of tip-toeing cautiously.

Last Sunday we celebrated Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit replaced prudence with power and with passion.

As we continue in this season of Pentecost, the call for you and for this church
is to keep prudence in its proper place and proportion,
to dream God's dreams,
to say "no" to fear,
to step out in faith,
and to take the risks God is calling you to take,
as the Spirit leads and empowers.