

## That We Might Have Joy

By Adena Moulton

I have never been a huge fan of risk. Growing up, I was never the kid who would jump off playground equipment, never the one who tried to see how much I could get away with in class, never even the one to try an edgy style. This has not changed at all since becoming an adult, whether I am advocating for careful, pragmatic decision-making at work, overthinking everything I say, or spending fifteen minutes choosing between three, almost identical phone cases, I avoid risk at all costs.

Which is why when I had the seemingly random thought that I should maybe go to seminary, I shut it down *fast*.

Because here's the thing: pursuing a call to ministry is in many ways the riskiest career decision I can make. As some of you know, I was raised as a devout Mormon, and in that tradition, women have very little power. We cannot be ordained under any circumstances, which means that we cannot hold most leadership positions. We cannot bless or distribute communion. We cannot baptize, marry, or simply lay our hands upon others in the community. Even though women do frequently speak in local church services, we are almost always followed by a man, who literally has the last word every. Single. Time.

So, for me to presume that God might be asking me to do *any* of that is incredibly risky, not only because I am going against two decades of intense religious indoctrination but because doing so will, without question, bring pain to myself and to my devout Mormon friends and family.

Let me explain.

In Mormonism, whether someone decides to remain in or leave the Church is literally a matter of life and death. The Mormon Church claims that it is God's only true church and the only way to be saved is through strict obedience to its teachings. Those who actively reject God, particularly if they were fortunate enough to be members of God's only true church, are described to be in a state of Spiritual Death, doomed to an unfulfilling life on earth and to eternal separation from God and their families in the life to come.

But that's not even the end of it.

Joining another church, like, for example, the PCUSA, and advocating that church's teachings, say becoming ordained after completing seminary, is one of the definitions of apostasy in Mormonism, which automatically necessitates excommunication. And in a faith tradition where phrases like Spiritual Death are common, excommunication is not unlike spiritual capital punishment. In fact, if excommunicated, my baptism, at least in the eyes of the Mormon Church, would be rendered null and void. In other words, I would have betrayed God so completely, that God would rescind God's promises to me and it would be as if I had never been baptized at all.

So that was that. Going to seminary was a terrible idea and I dismissed the thought immediately. Why would I even consider something so hard or so painful? It would be too risky. Which is why I was mildly terrified when the idea came again. And again. And again. The thoughts continued for weeks until I eventually found myself googling divinity programs in the bathroom at work. It was only after I had done that several times that I finally started taking this whole "going to seminary" idea seriously.

Deciding whether to attend seminary forced me to reckon with one of the foundational commandments I had received my entire life. Never leave Mormonism. I needed to hold fast to

Mormonism because it was the only way I could have eternal life. It was the only way I could be happy. Not only that, such a blatant rejection of God's only true church would bring much deeper pain and fear to my devout Mormon friends and family than if I just gradually stopped attending. Above all it would mean spiritual death. Eternal life or spiritual death. It was that simple, and yet so, so complicated because God seemed to be calling me to death, despite the very real consequences.

Which brings me to Genesis and another seemingly simple, life-or-death command: "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree . . . nor shall you touch it, or you shall die."

Friends, I wonder how much time Eve spent staring at the tree of knowledge of good and evil wondering about the taste of its fruit. I wonder if it began as a random thought as she passed by the tree to rest her feet in the crystal-clear waters of the river. Then perhaps it came again as she and Adam shared a meal. Then again as she went for a walk in the cool of the evening. Perhaps the thought eventually never left, humming constantly in the back of her mind as she went about her life day after day after day.

I imagine Eve felt very lonely, considering this tree and the bewildering command that she must not eat its fruit even though it was literally right in the middle of the garden. It's not like she could ask Adam, this being she was created from and yet did not seem to share her fascination with the tree. And she definitely could not ask God who had given just one commandment. A commandment she was actively considering breaking.

It must have been such a relief, then, when the serpent approached Eve and asked about the tree that seems to have occupied so much of her thoughts.

Eve explains that she and Adam could eat the fruit of any tree except for that which came from the tree in the center of the garden because if they ate of it, they would die.

Then the serpent turns everything on its head.

“You will not die;” the serpent explains, “for God knows that when you eat of [the fruit] your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

Now, hold on. The serpent is dropping some major bombshells. Eve won’t *actually* die if she eats the fruit? And for the record, the serpent wasn’t lying. Adam and Eve experienced death not because they ate the fruit but because God evicted them from Eden. These were two separate actions made by two separate beings. But that’s nothing to learning that eating the fruit will teach Eve the difference between good and evil, making her like *God*. With these words, a new future of unlimited possibilities opens because for the first time Eve will have the chance to learn, to grow, to change, to become wise.

All of a sudden, this clear-cut, life-and-death decision doesn’t seem so clear-cut anymore.

Now, at this point you might be thinking: *Ummm Adena, you know how this story ends, right? God lays down some hefty curses and pushes Adam and Eve out of the garden. Maybe it’s not such a great idea to compare your debate about going to seminary to the account of the first sin and fall of humankind.*

These are fair points, to which I respond with this question, “What would have happened if Eve had never tasted the fruit?”

The text’s answer is clear: absolutely nothing.

Adam and Eve may have been in paradise, but they didn't know it was paradise. They may have been created for each other, but they couldn't truly love each other. They may have been created in God's image, but they could never learn or grow because they didn't have enough knowledge or agency to fail. They did not seem to have sexual desire or a full understanding of their bodies, so they couldn't have children, meaning that humanity itself could not exist.

Somewhat ironically, especially given how I began this sermon, my favorite theological commentary on Adam and Eve comes from the Book of Mormon, which Mormons hold as sacred as the Bible. It chronicles the thousand-year history of a family that left Jerusalem, journeyed to the Americas where they grew into two competing civilizations that eventually destroyed each other through unending war.

The passage we read today comes very early in the Book of Mormon. The family has recently arrived in the Americas and the patriarch, whose name is Lehi, is on his deathbed. He's giving his last sermon to his sons, who have divided into two groups that constantly fought amongst themselves but have managed to stay together in some semblance of familial unity, largely out of a shared love for their father. In these fraught family dynamics, it was clear that Lehi's death would lead to the permanent division of an entire family. It is in this moment of imminent death and irreconcilable familial conflict that Lehi discusses Adam and Eve. But not to curse them, mourn their foolishness, or lament on all the pain and wickedness they brought on the world. Instead, he explains that their supposed Fall was actually necessary, that it was the only way for humankind to exist. And Lehi doesn't stop there. He explains that we are not born to suffer, although life certainly involves suffering. We are not born to fail, although we will. We are not born to hurt others, although we'll do that too. Instead we are born to love. We are born to succeed. We are born to have joy.

And none of this. None of this would be possible without Eve and her willingness to take the biggest risk of all time.

Eve partook of the fruit and as a result pain, sorrow, shame, injustice, oppression, and death entered the world. But so did love. So did laughter. So did knowledge. So did liberation. So did joy.

Eve may have been the first person to sin, but she also was the first to do good. And what makes her story so profound is that she did both at the same exact time.

Now to be clear, I don't believe the story of Adam and Eve nor the story of Lehi and his family literally happened, but as I contemplate one of the riskiest decisions of my life, I do believe they are both deeply true.

So as I prepare to heed God's call to ministry, I know that my choice will bring peace and hope to some and conflict and uncertainty to others. I know that sometimes I will succeed and that sometimes I will utterly fail. I know that sometimes I will bind others wounds and sometimes I will just aggravate them. There will be times when I will be fueled with an overwhelming sense of purpose and excitement and times when I will feel like a barely functioning disaster. Knowing all this, as I stand at the edge of the Garden of Certainty, I try my best to have faith in myself and hope in God that I will have more good days than bad ones and create more joy than sorrow.

Friends, God is calling me out of the Garden. I believe God calls each of us out of the Garden, in big and small ways. I also believe as things in our city, our nation, and our world seem increasingly dire, as climate change quickly reaches a point of no return, as division, injustice, and inequality continue to fester, that God is calling all of us as a community out of the Garden of certainty and complacency into the much riskier world of action and change. For it only after

we leave the Garden that we will find God's Kingdom. A Kingdom where pain and oppression will cease and love and community will thrive forever and ever.

And as we move forward, let us all take strength in our mother Eve who fell that humanity might be, and we are that we might have joy.