

## **Lent 1 February 26 2023**

**Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11**

Sin is one of those “church words” that often gets thrown around, but I wonder if folks really understand what it means.

In the Greek, the word for sin can mean to miss the mark, to shoot something other than the bullseye. To aim at one thing and hit something else (Paul’s I want to do this good thing, but I do these other things instead). In Hebrew the word means something like transgression- to cross a boundary into a place you should not go. If being righteous in the Jewish mind is to be in right relationship with God- loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, strength- and loving our neighbors as ourselves- then sin is when we cross the boundary into not doing those things. Sin ruptures the relationship we have with God and with our fellow humans. It harms in a way that a simple, “I’m sorry” does not heal. It poisons not just the persons involved, but others around them.

This is what Christians mean when we talk about sin coming into the world through Adam and Eve. That their transgression, their sin has poisoned the relationship between humans and God, and among humans ever since. In a way that we can’t get ourselves out of. A feedback loop of sin, death, and destruction.

They sentenced the young man who killed my stepson, Erik, this past Tuesday. He was sorry for driving drunk that early morning, I don’t doubt that he is, but there are consequences for our actions once taken, even when we are sorry. Even when we own up to it. His sin crossed the boundary between life and death and

the consequences of that sin have spilled over onto people who had nothing to do with it in the first place.

It has impacted his family and friends, Erik's family and friends, this church, the doctors and nurses, first responders, the prosecutors, court personnel, and countless others. Caused pain, grief, hurt that extend well beyond that one moment. The consequences of sin made visible.

We have so personalized faith here in the US that it is almost unrecognizable in a biblical context. The Bible certainly calls for individual piety and belief, individual responsibility for sin- those places where we cross the boundary and rupture relationship with God and fellow humans, but it much more talks about community faithfulness and community sinfulness. The Hebrew Bible often talks about the sin of Israel or faithfulness of Israel. That consequences come because of communal actions, or lack of them. The sense is that when the community is faithful to God- often expressed as being faithful in our worship, caring for widows, orphans and the aliens in our land- those who are most vulnerable in society- faithful in that then things will go well. But it is also clearly expressed that when the community is sinful. When they begin to follow gods other than the Creator of All that exists, when they ignore the needs of the widows, orphans, and aliens in our land- the most vulnerable among us. When they think they know better than God does. The consequence is bad things will happen. Now, is that "fair" to the individuals who have been faithful even when their neighbors haven't? Perhaps not in our conception, but it makes sense, because when we are honest, we see how our actions- both positive and negative- impact others. It's the way God created this world.

I teach the Adam and Eve story to my UD class. There is the usual cry that God is responsible for their disobedience because if he hadn't said, "Don't eat that" they would have never been tempted. My response to that is, "If you live next to a busy road, then you wouldn't say to your kids, 'Don't play in the street' because that would tempt them to do just that. Right?" If they play in the road, it's because they didn't trust that you knew better. Here it is even worse than that. Adam and Eve believed not only that they knew better than God, that their judgment about what was good and bad was more reliable, they also believed they could know the things that God knows. That they could handle that truth. So, they bit into the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil and the world has been going to hell in a handbasket ever since.

Why? Because even when we see the thing we ought to do, we do the opposite. We are driven by base desires. Ones that look to self. Just see what Adam and Eve do when they are caught. Each passes the blame. It's not my fault.

Even if they own up to it. There are consequences. Because the rupture has already happened. You can't change that. And the story of scripture since then has been God's pursuit of God's people in an attempt to mend what was broken. But each time, we muck it up.

And then along comes Jesus. And he's different. Just take a look at our text for today.

The temptations of Jesus come right after his identity is confirmed through baptism. God's voice proclaims, "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Then Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days. Struggling to discern what that identity means for him and for us.

The tempter comes along and whispers in his ear. Reasonable things, kind of like the serpent to Adam and Eve.

You're hungry, dude. Since you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread.

God has promised you will be safe. Since you're the Son of God, throw yourself off here and check it out. Prove you trust it.

You can have all this power. Rule the world in the right way. Do good! Since you are the Son of God. Just bow down to me. I'll give it to you.

There is nothing wrong per se in these temptations. You could easily talk yourself into any one of them. It's not like he's asking Jesus to kill someone.

Each time Jesus demurs, he does so by quoting from Deuteronomy. A book I just read not too long back in our read through the Bible in a year. It is the moment where the Israelites are just about in the promised land and Moses is giving them warnings about forgetting that it is God who provides, who got them to this land of plenty. The temptation is to forget that God is God and we are not. To forget that everything we have belongs to God, comes from God. We didn't earn or create it.

How this often gets framed in Deuteronomy is, if you obey God- live a righteous life in right relationship with God and your fellow humans as defined by God- then things will go well. If you disobey God- sin against God and your fellow humans- then things will fall apart. Choose God and you choose life. Choose your own way and you choose death.

Jesus' response to the making of bread comes from a moment in Deuteronomy where the Israelites are reminded God led you these 40 years in the wilderness. God fed you with manna- so that you know that you do not live by bread alone- but by every word that comes from God. Trust that God will feed- both body through daily bread, but also your soul through the teaching of God found in scripture and embodied now in Jesus. Listen to him, every day, so that you are not led astray by the voices of temptation that can sound so reasonable. So that you, too, can fling those texts, that life giving word, back into the tempter's face.

Jesus' response to throwing himself from the pinnacle of the temple is to quote the text from Deuteronomy 6:16 that references the moment that the Israelites in the wilderness, hot, tired, and thirsty, wondered whether God was with them or not. The quote is to trust God's promises implicitly without the need to check just to make sure. Trust God and God's word alone- for it has proved faithful since time immemorial.

Jesus' response to the offer of power comes from Deuteronomy 6:13 is first commandment stuff. That you serve, worship, follow God alone. That every other god only leads to destruction. That God alone can save. Period.

Our greatest sin, which leads to all the others, is to trust something or someone other than God. The original sin of Adam and Eve. Or even worse, to trust ourselves more than God.

God in Jesus knows the power, the allure of what led to that sin. God in Jesus has heard the whisper of the tempter in his ears. God in Jesus knows that voice that we hear saying, I'm okay to drive. That it's just a little lie. That they will never

find out. That if I get into this position, I can do some good. That it will be worth it. But on our own, it never is.

But Jesus did not fall for it. In Jesus we have the new Adam, one whose trust in God was absolute. Whose love for his fellow humans was complete. Who perfectly embodies God's desire from the time of Adam and Eve to now to heal the rupture that lies between us and God. Who comes to call us again, to usher us into the reign of heaven. A place of grace and mercy. A place of hope and purpose. A place of renewal and rebirth.

Through whom, when we follow after him, trust in him, we will find the life that truly is life. A life that is not without sin in our own life (fractured relationships, regrets, fear), and certainly not without the consequences of the communal sin we live in (war, disease, poverty), but one that is not dominated by it. Because in Jesus and through God's claiming of us in baptism we have been made a new creation. We have been given the antidote to the whispers of the tempter, the vaccine for the power of sin. Doesn't mean we won't suffer from symptoms, but it sure means we won't die from it.

So, when we are tempted. Let us turn to God's Word, to resettle us into what is true and right. When we sin, cross those boundaries into rupture of relationship with God, harm to our neighbors, let us confess that sin and trust in God's grace and do the hard work of reconciliation with our neighbors. When the consequences of sin surround us, seek to overwhelm us, let us rest in the arms of Jesus- who knows all about it- and who has over come it. Thanks be to God.