“Sin: Alienation and Grace”
Lent – Part 1
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University Presbyterian Church of Tempe, Arizona

Genesis 2.15-17, 3.1-7 (NRSV)

17 The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.
16 And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

3.1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?”

Matthew 4.1-11 (NRSV)

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 7 and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

I know today is the first Sunday in Lent. And I know Lent is a time for prayer and repentance—a season of cleansing the soul. But, before I get into today’s text, I want to share something with you. On it’s surface, it’s a fairly simple thing. But, it seems to be a very difficult thing for us. We so often behave like it’s not really true. We talk about it and even repeat it to one another at times. But we just can’t seem to trust it. Here it is: God loves you. It’s true! God really does love you, with a depth that is beyond anything else we could possibly imagine. I know it’s hard to believe. I know we’ve all done stuff, thought stuff, or said stuff we think is not deserving of God’s love. But, that’s just it: it doesn’t matter whether or not we think we deserve it. God loves us regardless. And nothing we do can change that. Sure, some of the ways we behave might make God disappointed. And, yes, there are still consequences for our behaviors—good and bad. But with such depth and breadth of love, why is it so hard for us to believe?

Well, I have some ideas why it may be so hard to believe. We’ve been given a lot of mixed messages over the years. We’re told that nothing, neither death, no life, nor angels, nor...
rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God revealed to us in Christ Jesus.\(^1\) That's from Paul's letter to the Romans. And then we are told how terrible we are and how much we need to confess, as though we can somehow earn God's grace and forgiveness. We're told by church leaders like John Calvin that we are totally depraved, that we're born sinful as a result of the fall of humanity described in Genesis 3—Eve violated God’s rule, got Adam to do the same, and shortly thereafter they are evicted from the Garden of Eden by an angry and vengeful God.

The whole Garden of Eden episode offers us some insights into the human psyche, actually, and how our ancient ancestors dealt with the existence of evil and sin. But, we need to remember that the whole creation and Garden of Eden stories are mythology—intended to teach stories about what it means to be human. They are true in that they give us insights into how our ancient spiritual ancestors understood their relationship to God and the world around them. But, just like we understand the world to not be flat and not the center of the universe, our understandings of how things work has evolved greatly. We can read these stories through the lens of our 21st century understandings of how the universe works and our place in it.

While the ancients believed that sinfulness was somehow inherited like some kind of genetic defect, here's how I think about all this: Human beings, along with most living organisms, have an instinctual desire to survive as a species. Some of that desire leads us to act individually in certain ways that can be very self-serving. Some of those self-serving ways turn out to be self-destructive, but they seem like a good option at the time. Lying for instance. We lie to change what we believe to be an otherwise inevitable outcome. Either we believe we are going to get in trouble, not be liked, or at least feel uncomfortable. So, we lie to alleviate those immediate feelings in order avoid punishment, alienation, or simply embarrassment. We all probably lie a lot more than we realize. But lying has consequences. We dig proverbial holes for ourselves, and after a while, the holes become so deep it's becomes difficult to climb out. Eventually, even little white lies will further alienate us from the very people with whom we're trying stay in a good relationship. Yet, we still keep on lying. It's like we can’t help it. Well, that's that self-preservation thing that keeps kicking in.

Does all this make us depraved? I don’t think so. We see this kind of self-preservation behavior in all kinds of animals. Okay, maybe they don’t lie like we do, but they do things that hurt other things in order to ensure their own existence. A wolf might work to undermine another wolf in the pack. One plant might slowly take over another plant, killing the other and making room for the invading plant. Some of this is the natural order of things—everything has a life cycle. It does not make those things depraved. We’re given this self-preservation gene so that we will survive as a species. It has been developed over millions and millions of years, and it does serve a purpose. We humans, however, also have the gift of self-awareness. We have the ability to actively seek to live in tune with other

\(^1\) Romans 8.38-39 (NRSV).
living things—protecting ourselves when we need to, but making space for other things when we can.

So, back to our readings for today. There is a concept called “original sin”—that we have inherited the sin of disobedience from Adam and Eve. The concept is drawn a lot from Paul’s writings. But it was a 2nd century bishop named Irenaeus who began developing the idea. In the 4th and 5th centuries, Augustine developed it even further to a point that it became a wildly popular idea.

But Jesus seems to push back against this idea. He seems to kind of obsess about grace and forgiveness instead of why we sin. The makers of our Revised Common Lectionary have done a curious thing for us on this first Sunday in the season of Lent: they have put Jesus’ temptation opposite the so-called “fall” story in Genesis 3. It seems like they are trying to suggest not-so-subtly that, though humanity is depraved as a result of the sin of the mythological first human beings, Jesus comes along, resists the temptation of the serpent (which is personified as the Satan), and reverses the original sin. The redeemer of humanity.

It’s a laudable theory. The original sin is so bad that humanity can’t recover from it. The only one who is good enough and pure enough is God. But God can’t do the recovering for humanity. So, God does a clever thing, as God is apt to do: God infuses God’s self into a human being, Jesus, and takes on that sin as the only being in the universe who can. Brilliant!

But I think there is another way to look at these texts, and to look at “sin” in general. What if we read these texts as not being about this whole ridiculousness of “original” or “inherited” sin, but in response to our natural and necessary desire to survive? In this scenario, the Adam and Eve story doesn’t share how humanity “inherited” sin, but reveals to us when that natural and good desire goes awry. Then, in the Matthew passage, Jesus is offering us an alternative narrative that we can choose to adopt for ourselves: namely, lifting up our ability to be self-aware. It’s easy to be tempted by all the things the Satan in Matthew 25 offers Jesus: power, safety, and wealth. We have witnessed in our own lifetimes what all those things can do to a person’s soul. Too much of any of those can make us lazy, arrogant, and even dangerous to ourselves and to the world.

We, as self-aware beings, can choose to live a different way with a different set of values: the value of redistributive justice that ensures everyone has enough to eat; the value of trusting in God’s ultimate goodness and God’s ultimate declaration that creation is good; the value of all human beings, that none are better or should be lifted up over others, that God loves all of us equally. Jesus chooses the latter, a conscious choice that does involve him letting go of the false promises that often tempt us to do things that leave us outside of God’s holy kin-dom of restorative, redistributive, and compassionate justice. God’s kin-dom is about long-term sustainability that will require short-term costs, in opposition to short-term gains with negative long-term consequences.
Let's just be honest with ourselves. All those short-term gains (by short-term I mean within our lifetime) have long-term costs that will need to be paid by the generations who follow us. And these short-term gains simply alienate us from our loved ones and communities, and further isolate us from the one thing we ultimate need and desire: the love of God. God doesn’t take God’s love away—we separate ourselves from it when we lie, when we hoard, when we chase after that dream of wealth and power that will never be satisfied.

Grace, a form of God’s love that is available to us every day, is God’s way of redeeming us from our own sense of self-preservation gone awry. Grace pulls us back to our true sense of being, reuniting us with our self-knowledge that we are connected to everything through the very existence of our loving and compassionate God. Grace reminds us of who we are and whose we are. Grace invites us into the transformative process of forgiveness, through which we can discover more deeply our humanity so that the eyes of our hearts and minds might be opened to the truth that God does love us, God does hope the best for us, and that God has given us so many gifts for which we can be thankful. And, the more thankful we are, the more likely we will want to share those gifts so that others might bask in the glory of gratitude for all that God has given.

Last night a small group of us gathered at Feed My Starving Children in Mesa. We gave of our time so that those who so often go without might have a chance. We were faced with the reality of our ridiculous wealth when compared to the rest of the world. We were given an opportunity for a small piece of redemption, to live into the kin-dom of redistributive justice. And it’s small steps like that, that lead to larger steps, that open to leaps toward a world in which all are cared for, none go hungry, and everyone has enough.

This lent, not give in to the fiction of scarcity. Let’s trust in God’s love for us and for everyone and everything, and seek to share that with the world. The next time someone asks for something, don’t lend it to them—give it to them. The next time you see someone who is struggling, do what you can to help them—even if it’s just holding a door open. The next time you see a fellow human being, share the gift of love by acknowledging them, maybe smiling at them. Live into the kin-dom of God by consciously choosing to do so. And when you forget, when you mess up, when you lose yourself in that all-to-necessary but often over-exaggerated instinct for survival, take a deep breath, give thanks to God, and start again. In other words, learn to trust these words: “God loves you.” And may God bless you in your efforts, in the name of our Creator, our Redeemer, and our Sustainer. Amen.