

The Rev. Jennifer Adams
Sermon preached on March 1, 2020
Lent I, Year B
"Talkin' 'Bout Sin"

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 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."

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?'" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Psalm 32

*5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you, * and did not conceal my guilt.*

*6 I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord." * Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin.*

*7 Therefore all the faithful will make their prayers to you in time of trouble; *
when the great waters overflow, they shall not reach them.*

Romans 5:12-19

As sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned-- sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" 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; 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.

This morning we're going to talk about sin. And there are a couple of reasons for that. First, while I've made huge steps post surgery, I still have what my speech therapist calls "turbulent s's." So what better time to talk about SIN, and really hit it. Sin is sort of a turbulent 'S' itself and so personally, I'm feeling some resonance. Second, is that you might have picked up on 'sin' as one of the themes that runs throughout this entire service, Lent 1. In case you missed it, a quick recap:

In just the first few biddings from The Great Litany we heard: our offenses, the offenses of our forefathers, our sins, evil, wickedness, assaults, inordinate and sinful affections, deceits, hardness of heart, contempt, blindness, pride, vainglory, hypocrisy, envy, hatred and malice, and everlasting damnation. Spare us we appropriately prayed in response.

Then in the reading from Genesis we heard the story of what some call "the explanation of how sin came to be." God told Adam not to eat the fruit of the tree of good and evil. Then God created Eve. The serpent showed Eve the tree. She "saw that the tree was good for food,... and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise," (thereby getting a hugely bum rap throughout nearly all of Christian tradition - but that's another sermon). Today, we'll suffice it to say that Eve ate the fruit, gave one to Adam who ate it too, and it was downhill from there.

From the Psalm we heard "sin", "sinfulness," "guilt", "transgressions" times many.

In the Letter to the Romans Paul wrote, "just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned --And law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased" Paul wrote, "grace abounded all the more. Paul, what does that even mean?"

And finally from Matthew Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights where he fasted. At the end of that time, Satan presented him with three temptations - changing stones into bread, jumping off a cliff for the angels to respond with a catch, and bowing down to Satan in order to be king of the world. And Jesus resisted. He remained sin free.

We need to dive into all of this and so the first thing I want to say is "Yes, Episcopalians talk about sin." We seem to take the wrap occasionally for being so into inclusivity that we neglect conversations about sin. I would propose that they are not mutually exclusive topics. You can be welcoming and inclusive and still teach about sin. You can be liturgical, diverse, mutual in ministry, non-authoritarian in leadership style, preaching love instead of hellfire, and still talk about and teach about sin. And we do.

We have confession in almost every service of worship for a reason. We acknowledge the need for forgiveness here. Nobody here is perfect nor do we have to pretend that we are. And that's important. Almost every Sunday

together (on our knees no less) we confess "those things done and left undone;" we confess "that we have not loved God with our our whole heart" nor have we "loved our neighbors as ourselves." "Have mercy on us and forgive us," we pray. Here we name sin, we confess it, collective sin too! And we understand that sins are a burden. And so here we're invited and encouraged to lay them down.

Now I would imagine that behind God's anger in the garden there was grief. That's often true with anger and this was grief, deep grief of a holy sort. By eating the fruit, humanity came to see too much. We would now live with this *awareness* of good and evil, light and darkness, joy and pain, and the mix of it all...and maybe what this story is telling us is that awareness itself was a burden God had hoped to spare us. And I can understand why God would want that for us. It hurts to watch sin unfold - the effects can be devastating. And it hurts to know when we've participated in it.

In this place, we offer absolution following the confession. For a reason. Because what we believe about sin is not only that we do it, but that God wishes of all things to set us free *from* sin. We're not meant to hit each other over the head with how bad we are or to compete for how good we are; we're meant to set ourselves and others free.

Which means that when we talk about sin, or walk through a season devoted in part to acknowledging the reality of human sinfulness, it's not meant to be a hammer or become more of a burden than sin already is. Lent is not meant to be a season by which the church scares people into place.

As confusing as Paul was in his letter to the Romans he is talking about in his own words "the free gift" and the "abundance of Grace." Any conversation of sin must have phrases like those woven into its heart. We heard a bit of a circular theological argument this morning with Paul tying together Genesis and the coming of Christ (more than once in fact,) but in those verses he too was talking about the freedom God hopes for us and offers to us. In his book *The Good News of Jesus*, New Testament scholar, Bill Countryman wrote that "[In Romans] Paul was saying that in Jesus, we discover something fundamentally important about God: God's love takes us up precisely when we are least deserving of it, when we are least lovable. God expresses his love specifically for those who *don't* deserve it... Take yourself down to your lowest...most undeserving state and there is God's love for you, as alive as ever."

We talk about and pray about sin in this place, so that we too can be present in those kinds of places, not as our shiny selves, but as the selves that need forgiveness and care. We welcome those selves here too. "The point Paul is making," Countryman says, "is not that we are grotesquely sinful, but that God is *astonishingly and unfailingly generous*."

And we can be too...Enter the Christ.

Who as the collect, creed, and Lenten preface in the Eucharist Prayer say, "did not sin." During this time in the wilderness and throughout his entire life, Jesus resisted the temptation to prove himself "Son of God" in ways defined by the devil. Jesus was sin free and in this story, resisted changing stones into bread, coming to us not as a magician but a Savior. He resisted throwing himself down, choosing instead to simply offer himself and walk among us as gift. And finally in this story having been promised all the kingdoms of the world, Jesus refused that kind of power, revealing over time that "servant" would be his way of ushering in a new kind of kingdom.

Now there is a lot in all of that for all of us. Which is perhaps why we're given 40 days and 40 nights to sit with this, to be present with ourselves, each other, and God and this "free gift" this "abundant grace." This deserves time and as I

said on Ash Wednesday, it also takes some courage to be present with the the good and evil we see and do, and to allow ourselves to be embraced by God's desire to set the world free - with forgiveness and with love.

So as we close today, I want us to see just one more thing. I want us to take another minute or two and consider what the Messiah did to communicate to this world that God created, what the Messiah did to reveal to this world that God so loved - what sin free looked like, what "astonishingly and unfailingly generous" looks like. It's important for us as church to not only name sin but also to make note perhaps in very large, bold letters that which God considers "not sinful," simply by virtue of having had Jesus do those kinds things. We need this list in front of us this season too. So here we go...

Eating with outcasts and touching untouchables. Not sinful.

Challenging those who insisted on their own righteousness. Not sinful.

Inviting women to preach and to lead. (We'll hear about one gospel woman in a couple of weeks. And on Easter morning too!) Not sinful.

Healing on the Sabbath.

Prioritizing love above all things.

Challenging (and expecting) religious leaders to learn and to grow.

Asking people to lay down stones instead of teaching them to throw stones at each other.

All - not sinful.

Showing widespread, seemingly random, and yet surprisingly effective mercy.

Turning water into wine to share at a celebratory feast.

Speaking against religious authorities and religious law when it was used to divide and unfairly burden people, rather than uniting and setting people free.

Not sinful.

Blessing (therefore prioritizing) the poor, the meek, those who mourn, and the peacemakers.

Asking people to share their food, their clothing, their homes.

Serving the least of these my brothers and sisters.

Not sinful.

Note too that while in the story we heard today it was considered a temptation for Jesus to make bread, later in the very same gospel (and all of the other gospels too) it was considered a miracle when he multiplied loaves in order to feed over 5000 hungry people. And Christ himself became bread for the world. So when talking about temptation and sin, context matters, purpose matters, even for the Messiah.

I invite you this Lenten season to be aware of both kinds of lists - 'sinful' and 'not sinful.' Name what it is you need to lay down and release the burdens you carry. Pay attention too to that which God considers "not sinful" because it's a very long and beautiful list. And more than being "not sinful" those kinds of Christ-like actions can be life-giving, new-life giving. Risk mercy. Offer love. Receive the astonishing and unfailing generosity of God, this season and share it with others too.

For together we will rise.

Amen