

## Lent I: "Back to Basics"

---

And so, there was "Fat Tuesday" (in the liturgy of the church, it's officially called 'Shrove Tuesday'), and Mardi Gras (which isn't in the liturgy of the church); and then on Wednesday, quietly, with ashes and contemplation, we slipped into the season of Lent.

Disciple scholar Beverly Gaventa writes, "Lent is not the time of "bad news" that precedes the "good news" of Easter. ...It is a time of grace when the people of Christ reflect, not only on our mortality and (imperfections), but also on the creative and re-creative power of God by which (we) are restored" in our relationships with God, with one another, and with ourselves.

During Epiphany, and then between Pentecost and Advent, much of my preaching focuses on joining in partnership with God's ongoing acts of creation and redemption—taking our place in Christ's yoke and becoming proactive participants in a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.

But Lent is unique in the church's liturgies, and calls us more to personal introspection and confession, and to an acknowledgment that the realities we confess already are overcome by the love and power of Christ.

Beverly Gaventa, again: "To engage Lent and to be engaged by it is to render oneself vulnerable to the reality of who we are as human beings. It also is to open ourselves to the nature of God as redeemer, the One who will not abide the chasm sin has created between God and God's beloved human creatures; and who therefore insists on spanning that chasm with love."<sup>1</sup>

In that spirit, hear now the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures:

### Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 (NRSV)

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

\*\*\*

<sup>3:1</sup> 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?'"<sup>2</sup> The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the

garden;<sup>3</sup> 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.'"<sup>4</sup> But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die;<sup>5</sup> for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."<sup>6</sup> 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.

In late July 1961, the Green Bay Packers gathered for training camp. The

---

<sup>1</sup> Paraphrased from *Texts for Preaching—Year A* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) p. 182-183.

previous season had ended with a heartbreaking last-minute loss to the Philadelphia Eagles in the NFL Championship game. Legendary coach, Vince Lombardi, opened training camp with words similar to this: "Gentlemen, we lost our last game because we didn't execute the basics—the fundamentals—of the game. So, we're going back to basics." And, holding a football over his head, "Gentlemen, this is a football."

Today's reading from *Genesis* leads the community of faith back to basics. The story sets the stage for our most basic understanding of our true life with God. It describes the disconnect between the life God created us to live and the life we choose. Most of us already have heard the story. We know what it says; therefore, we're more likely to anticipate than to listen, when it's read. I am grateful to Walter Brueggemann's guidance into a fresh appreciation of the text, and my sharing with you this morning, while in my own words, is heavily dependent on his insight. The text is a story of contrasts and contradictions.

It's overly simplistic to say the humans broke the rules and got kicked out of the garden. God connected the man and the woman to the garden in a delicate and intentional relationship: the humans "keep" the garden; the garden "sustains" the human. In that relationship there is both "permission" and "prohibition". The permission: "freely eat." There are trees in the garden that give life.

But by contrast there's "another tree" capable of death. This tree is dangerous because it can disrupt the delicate, ordered, innocent, and reverent relationship between God and God's human creatures. Of this tree, "you shall not eat;" and thus is introduced yet another level of God's creative genius and grace, the quality of "free moral choice"—the quality, perhaps, by which humanity most clearly reflects the image of God in which we are created.

Then the story takes on a threatening tone: "the serpent" is introduced.

And again, the contrasts are dramatic. God acts with strong and decisive verbs: God formed, God breathed, God planted, God put, God made, God took, God commanded. God is a self-starter, and the universe is the result.

By contrast, the serpent has no strong verbs, does nothing, has no power to act, is incapable of transformative intervention. The serpent can only talk. And the serpent speaks twice: the first time, the serpent questions what God said, "Did God really say...?" (v. 1) The second time, the serpent contradicts what God said, "You shall not die." (v. 4)

The serpent seizes upon God's newest creation: moral choice; and offers options, which the humans accept and thereby violate God's intention for them (v. 6). Their innocence is replaced by awareness—they "know" nakedness (v. 7). The problem is not nakedness: the problem is that their innocence is shattered and deformed. Their new awareness changes everything they've known. It requires new

choices, new decisions, new responsibilities, new accountability; and thus, their innocence is replaced by fear: "What if I get it wrong?"

The serpent says, "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

The deception is that they already *are* like God—created in God's image; they already *know* good and evil. But fear and doubt have entered the garden and have entered humanity. God designed a relationship of innocence and trust; but fear replaced trust and created tension in the human relationship with God.

This text invites us to begin our Lenten journey by reflecting on the gift of innocence and the power of fear. Setting aside previous readings and understandings of the text, digging through the layers of centuries of interpretation—simply letting the story speak for itself, it's not about the "fall" or "original sin." It's a narrative that makes us aware of the contradictions that resist God's creative intentions and distort human innocence. The story sorts out the competing, conflicting voices by which we humans, as free moral agents, try to identify ourselves:

- the voice of innocence vs the voice of awareness;
- the voice of trust vs the voice of fear;
- the voice of faith vs the voice of certainty;
- the voice of ambition vs the voice of contentment;
- the voice of success vs the voice of obedience.

The humans misunderstand their relation to God, and therefore misunderstand their place in the garden. Their options were trust and innocence versus fear and awareness. We have the same options; and this text is an invitation back to basics: back to the single voice that speaks the truth of who we are:

"So God created humankind in God's image,  
in the image of God God created them;  
male and female God created them..

<sup>31</sup> God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good.