

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

Psalm 32

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

It was a big turning point in my life and the lives of my children when it came time for them to go to school. I told them lots of things to get them ready. I told them that they were going to do great. I told them that they would make new friends and that they were going to have a wonderful time. And I told them that they were going to learn lots of new things. But the very last thing I told each of them was, "Don't ever come home and tell me that somebody else got you in trouble!" It seemed important to me and to their father that we instill in them a sense of personal responsibility right from the beginning. Each of them did have their fair share of getting into trouble in school, but not once did they ever blame it on anyone else! Shifting the blame for our own sins is always a great temptation and that's exactly what our scripture passages talk about today...temptation...and sin.

We begin in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. It's a story familiar to most people whether or not they are schooled in a religious tradition. And it's a story to illustrate human nature along with those impulses we have to do what we are not supposed to do. Living in a pristine and perfect world, Adam and Eve were given only one prohibition...do not eat the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden...the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. "If you do," God says, "you will die." Now there were lots of living creatures in God's creation before human beings were created...and these living creatures died...and some species even became extinct. So let's not think that God changed the rules about his creation. Human bodies...like the bodies of all other creatures...die. But human souls...the part of us that is connected to God...may not necessarily die. For that part of us to die, we have to be completely disconnected from God. And certainly our sinfulness contributes to that separation. The story of the Garden of Eden is about the beginning of that separation.

The serpent is that impulse within us that helps us make it OK or even attractive to do something we know darn good and well we aren't supposed to do. Not only does the serpent introduce us to sin, the serpent also introduces us to a very interesting series of mental gymnastics called rationalization. When we rationalize, we come up with all the really good reasons why what we are about to do isn't really wrong...or is, perhaps, even a really good idea. Let's see...in the case of Adam and Eve...fruit is nutritional and good for us so why shouldn't we eat it? Or, knowing the difference between good and evil is actually a good thing and will guide us in making good choices. And, of course, the consequences aren't *really* the

consequences...we aren't actually going to die because we ate the forbidden fruit. You get my drift, I'm sure. Any of us...and I suspect that is all of us...who have ever tried to convince ourselves that doing something we know full well is something that we shouldn't be doing is adept at rationalization. It's a skill that seems to come with our humanity along with our proclivity to sin.

And then, of course, there's the aftermath when Adam and Eve are confronted by God about doing the one thing God has forbidden them to do. Adam passes the blame on to Eve who quickly passes the blame on to the serpent who is then soundly punished by God along with Adam and Eve who are banished from a perfect and pristine world. In addition to being introduced to the phenomenon of rationalization, we are also now acquainted with the custom of 'passing-the-buck.' You see, once we know what we are not supposed to be doing, we are responsible. No one else. It's never anybody else's fault. We can always say, "No!" Once we can see what's not supposed to be happening, we can't go back and plead ignorance. We can't pretend that we just didn't know or we just didn't see it that way. We are plainly guilty. No matter whose idea it was. End of message. Adam and Eve's decision to disobey God now becomes the DNA of all humanity. We will never again be perfect and obedient beings as Adam and Eve were created to be. Our tendency to sin is now simply part of who we are...like our eye color or our hair color or our skin color. It's part of us. And no matter how hard we try to avoid it or deny it, we are sinful beings.

The disobedience of Adam and Eve created a great chasm between them and God. They were banished from the peaceful and perfect world in the garden and were thrust into a world which becomes more and more broken with every sin that humans commit. We can't go back. We can't fix it. And the chasm between us and God becomes wider and wider and deeper and deeper. There is no way that we pitiful humans are going to be able to bridge that chasm. We just can't. And it's not a matter of wanting to. Of course, we want to. We don't have the ability to bridge that gap. The chasm is going to need to be bridged from God's side through a perfect human being. Enter Jesus.

We listened this morning to the three temptations that Jesus faced while in the wilderness being hounded by the devil. The devil wasn't characterized this time as a serpent; it seemed to have more human qualities. That battle between good and evil...between sinfulness and purity...was going on inside of Jesus during those forty days in the wilderness. And those forty days in the wilderness are the ones we commemorate during the forty days of Lent. It's the time that we challenge ourselves to overcome and set aside some of our own sinfulness to remember and honor the terrific battle Jesus fought in the wilderness before he began his ministry. The opportunities that Jesus had for rationalization make the ones we dream up seem

pretty puny. For example, there is absolutely nothing wrong with turning a stone into bread when you are living in a human body that requires food and you have been without any for forty days. It takes less than 24 hours for me to be convinced that I am going to die...imminently...for lack of food. Jesus didn't succumb. He didn't do it. And he must have been powerfully hungry. But his mission was to correct all the sinfulness now in the DNA of humans, so he could not allow his human side...with all that sinful DNA...to win...no matter how good the rationalization was.

So then Satan placed Jesus on the pinnacle of the Temple and dared him to fling himself off as a way of demonstrating his trust in God because...and here Satan has the audacity to quote scripture to Jesus...it is written in Psalm 91 verse 11 &12:

For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.

¹²On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

And Jesus quoted scripture right back to him

Deuteronomy 6:16 ¹⁶Do not put the LORD your God to the test,

It's good for all of us to be aware that Satan knows scripture, too, and has no reservation about using it to intentionally mislead us. That's one of the reasons it's a good idea for us to know Scripture as well...so that we know when it's being misused and we know how to combat the inaccurate or misappropriated Bible verse.

And Jesus was offered rule over all the nations of the world. All he had to do was bow down and worship Satan. Jesus knew that he would be a good ruler. He knew that he could bring peace to the warring nations, but as attractive as the end game was and as right as it seemed, Jesus wasn't going to be fooled into worshipping Satan. This a great example of why 'the end does not justify the means.' Jesus worshiped only God and he wasn't going to sell out even for something that held the potential for being very good for all of humanity...justice in rule on the earth.

After his forty days in the wilderness, Jesus was triumphant and reassured that he was indeed going to be able to fulfill his mission on earth. He was going to be able to cure the sick, feed the poor, restore sight to the blind...and most importantly...he was going to be able to fulfill his mission on the cross...that one act of pure love that would bridge that horrible chasm between God and man that had begun with Adam's and Eve's disobedience. Jesus was now assured that he was not going to sin. He was not going to fall prey to temptation...in any form. He was not going to give in to rationalization for wrongdoing and he was not going to pass the buck.

Salvation through Jesus Christ is not a return to some kind of paradise that was here originally. It is God's healing of the beloved creation. In Christ, God has begun the new creation and the end of our alienation from the Source of life. Just as our identity was once defined by Adam, our identity in Jesus Christ gives us a new identity...a new way of being. We are not perfect. We shall never be perfect, but we have been given the way home through Jesus. We were once identified with the disobedience of Adam. Now we are identified with the salvation of Jesus. What Adam did was a trespass...a sin...a disobedience. What Jesus did was a free gift. Jesus did not begin in a perfect world, but a world filled with sin and death. Jesus' costly obedience dwarfs Adam's paltry disobedience. Christ had to do what Adam should have done and didn't. The Rev. Dr. Katherine Grieb tells us "One man's act of disobedience led to condemnation for all; however, one man's act of righteousness leads to 'putting things right' and life for all. One man's disobedience made many to be sinner, but one's man perfect obedience will make many righteous."¹

God gave us the law; but we break it. Now we know what sin is and we can't go back. We can't plead ignorance. We can't say that we didn't see or we didn't understand or that we didn't know; we are simply unable to keep the law, so God gave us Jesus to bridge the chasm between God and us. On Jesus' coattails we will be led into the kingdom of God.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

¹Grieb, A. Katherine, The Story of Romans: A narrative defense of God's righteousness, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville and London. 2002. P.66