

[Readings: 2 Chron. 36:14-16, 19-23; Psalm 137; Eph 2:4-10; John 3:14-21]

“Early and often,” as the First Reading suggests, we know where our actions are taking us. We know, for example, that violent means do not lead to peaceful ends. Yet we pursue them over and over, hoping the laws of human dynamics will change this time, just this once, just for us.

Or how about the folk wisdom that says people aren’t going to change just because you marry them? How many couples have seen the warning signs, early and often, that the “sparks” between them included flamethrowers and went ahead anyway, counting on the grace of matrimony to transform the situation?

Early and often, we observe, anger does not make for a satisfying or successful lifestyle. Nor does surrender to addiction, greed, the blame game, or self-righteousness. Each time we exercise these life strategies, they fail us; yet we persist in them because they are familiar and well-worn grooves in the road.

The theology of original sin might be viewed through this lens: Early and often, humanity chooses against the primary law of love and suffers the effects of that decision in a world fraught with corruption and death. When you consider that there are more than 7 billion people on the planet right now, that’s an awful lot of sin we’re talking about. Never mind the thousands of generations that have gone before us, leaving a legacy of sinful choices in their wake.

The Hebrew story is a cautionary tale about what happens when an all-loving God creates an all-good world and then sets it free to pursue its own destiny. Sin happens, as the bumper stickers remind us in a more colorful way. But it doesn’t just “happen” -- it is chosen. Free people freely choose it. The original sin is deliberate, as is every decision for sin that follows. Though we are caught in a web of sin that now permeates our imperfect world, we also make clear and reasoned choices away from goodness.

For example, early and often Jesus preached forgiveness, conversion, and salvation. But we make choices for unforgiveness, insisting people don’t change and that they deserve destruction. So we identify our enemies (when Jesus said we should love them) and find ways to isolate and even kill them.

In this regard, we much prefer the God described by Chronicles, who first warned the people to change their ways and finally consigned them to be conquered, crushed, and swept into exile. *That* God makes sense to us. *That* God does what we ourselves do or would like to do. *That* God, frankly, is as moral as we are and doesn't challenge us to go beyond a this-for-that moral yardstick.

But what about the God that Saint Paul describes for us? A God who is rich in mercy, with great love for us, who encounters us "dead" in our transgressions and wills, through grace, to raise us up to new life! Paul talks about God's "kindness" and the pure "gift" of salvation. We are God's handiwork, not the shame of our Creator. And God has prepared in advance a way of "good works" for us to live in -- not the bog of centuries of sin and its wages.

How do we reconcile the view of Chronicles and that of Ephesians? Chronicles looks through the lens of original sin and concurs that, early and often, humanity suffers the natural consequences of its sinfulness. Paul views human history through the lens of grace and acknowledges that, early and often, God reaches out to save and preserve us. Whose perspective is the right one? Both are true -- yet the verdict, Jesus tells us, has already come in, in favor of salvation.

We are told, rather uncomfortably, that Jesus became sin for our sake. It is an ugly phrase, equating the embodiment of love with the source of human suffering. But it is not really much different from saying that the Lord of heaven and Earth took on our flesh and was born as one of us. If we want to be cured of the effects of our mortality, we must lift our eyes to the one who shared it fully and suffered it profoundly. By taking on sin, suffering, and death, Jesus transformed our relationship with all three.

God did not come into the world to condemn us but to save us, and participate in the work of salvation. God's verdict favors the light. THAT is something to rejoice about! AMEN!