

Out of the Ashes: New Creation

Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7

Matthew 4:1-11

March 9, 2014: First Sunday in Lent

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I. Introduction

I had an interesting conversation this week with one of our church family members who said to me that he had noted that he had been coming here awhile and he had never heard a sermon on sin. Well, it was interesting to me because I feel like I've talked about sin all the time but it occurred to me that I don't always use the word "Sin." Maybe I'm being even less clear than I think I'm being when I'm talking to you about this.

So, I wanted to start off by saying the Greek word sin "hamartia" means to miss the mark, and essentially it is trying to convey this idea that we have fallen short of who God has called us to be. That is what sin is. In that falling short, we have broken the relationship that God offers us and therefore, we have also broken the relationships that we have with one another. So you often will hear me talk about brokenness and what I'm trying to convey there is the idea of sin, of having missed the mark, so I use a variety of words to get at this idea of what sin is about. You'll hear me talking about brokenness. You'll hear me talk about separation. You'll hear me talk about fallenness. You'll hear me talk about injustice which is an expression of our sinfulness and sometimes occasionally, you'll hear me talk about actual sin.

You'll also hear me talk about sin with both a small "s," by which I mean those things each of us do that result in brokenness of relationship, the mistakes each of us make, me, Charlie Parker, Jack, Leila, Linda, all of us -- I'm picking out the major

sinner (!)-- but all of the things that we do. But I also talk about Sin with a capital "S" I mean the systems of brokenness in which we all reside, systems that perpetuate racism and economic injustice and environmental exploitation. That's the water in which we swim, so sin is both those things I do and also the systems in which I live, which God also calls us to engage and try to heal.

So I'm going to be extra clear this morning, I'm talking about sin today. In fact, I'm actually talking about sin for all of Lent. Don't get depressed about that. Lent is the time in which we are invited to reflect on our sinfulness, on our areas of brokenness. I'm going to be spending a little time each week during Lent, using the lectionary text. We're going to follow the lectionary throughout this season and explore one particular area of brokenness every week during Lent, which is going to have some individual impact and some systemic impact.

The reason we do this during Lent is because it is part of the way that we prepare ourselves to experience Easter because we can't experience healing until we've started to acknowledge and explore why we need healing, right? We can't experience the forgiveness that Christ offers us through the sacrifice of the cross unless we have come to a place where we understand that we have contributed to that and ask forgiveness. We can't experience the power and transformation of new life through the resurrection of Jesus until we have started to clear away those barriers that we have set up between ourselves and God. So this is not about beating up on ourselves, it is not about getting discouraged, it's about trying to bring some clarity to exploring those areas in which our relationships with ourselves, with each other and with God need some healing.

II. Original Sin

Our lectionary texts this week start off with the sort of paradigmatic story of sin. It is a story from which St. Augustine derives the term “Original Sin” because it describes this place of being in this idyllic relationship with God and with creation, and how we have turned away from that, and the resulting brokenness that comes out of that. There are a couple of pieces I want to focus on in this *Story of the Fall* in *Genesis*. The first is to note that we are placed in the story in the Garden of Eden to do two things. We’re there to till and to keep. We’re there to conserve and to nurture. That’s why God puts us in Eden, to care for this wondrous creation that God has just put in place. That is our first call, our first duty, is to care for the sacredness of God’s creation. The word “keep” there is the same Hebrew word as to conserve, to hold on to, to cherish. The word “to till” is about nurturing, how we help God in the process of creation by nurturing the Earth so that he can continue to be bountiful and fruitful and beautiful. This is the second of two creation stories in *Genesis* and the first story of creation also ends with this mandate, that God creates humankind, male and female, and gives us stewardship of the Earth, our first and foremost call.

The second piece that happens again right at the very beginning of this passage is that God gives us the use of all of the resources of creation but puts some limits on it. God says you can eat of all of trees except these two. So there’s this call both to care for the Earth, to use the Earth for our benefit, but within boundaries. Boundaries that of course we immediately cross because we hate boundaries, and this is the one thing God asked us to do, is to limit our use of the gifts of creation in a way all of creation continues to flourish, and we can’t do it. As a result of that unwillingness to

heed God's boundaries, we break our relationship with God, we break our relationship with one another and we break our relationship with the very created order that God has asked us to care for.

III. Life in the Desert

The second century theologian Irenaeus, who was a bishop of Lyons, was the first Theologian in our tradition, second century, to look at the parallels between this *Genesis* creation fall story and Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Irenaeus points out that the story in *Genesis* moves from this idyllic garden into the desert while the Matthew story moves from the desert towards renewal of new life and new creation. He points out that Christ's obedience in the Matthew stories stands in stark opposition to Adam and Eve's disobedience in the *Genesis* story. That Satan's success in tempting away Adam and Eve is contrasted with Jesus' complete submission to God's will. Irenaeus also pointed out the juxtaposition of the tree that is the place where Adam and Eve fall versus the tree of the cross on which Jesus hangs to reconcile all of that fallenness. It is not accidental that this first temptation that we heard is about setting aside the laws of nature and inviting Jesus to use his power to change his environment. Jesus opts not to exploit the natural order and instead again submits himself to God's will and in that submission brings about healing for all of us.

IV. Perpetually Fallen

So, what I want to reflect on a few minutes this morning is this call to care for creation because I'm going to suggest to dear friends, delicately, that if our first job is to care for creation, we are never going to get a second job because we have done

such a miserable job of this. I don't have to unpack all of the places in which our current lifestyle continues to violate the sacredness of our Earth. But every single week, we are deluged with expressions of this and just in this last week, I heard a NPR story on a huge fight about EPA's attempt to regulate coal emissions in Appalachia, in new coal plants, and those of our church family who had been on the Appalachian Service Project every year know how the coal industry has devastated that community and the families that we go to serve in that community. I read a piece about DC Water and Sewer seeking to lift the agreement that they have, the court ordered agreement to limit the amount of sewage that gets dumped in the Anacostia River every year. And lest you think that all of the environmental impact is elsewhere, this week our church was part of a boil water order that was put out by the city because our water here in this church was too contaminated to drink.

Friends, you know how passionate I am about economic justice issues. I'm going to say to you this morning that caring for creation is not only our first call chronologically. I want to say it's arguably our most important call, because if we don't get this piece right, we don't get to work on the other stuff. This is a time-limited critical piece of who we are as Christian disciples. In our society, care for creation often gets played off against economic growth and job creation, and there is certainly a piece of those two calls that stand in some tension to one another. But I also think that they get intentionally played off each other in ways so that certain segments of our economy benefit. We can commit ourselves to both economic growth and job creation and care for the environment at the same time. It's harder, it requires greater creativity and sometimes greater sacrifice on our part but we can do both of those things.

I also want to suggest that if we're going to err on one side or the other, we've got to err on the side of caring for creation. We don't get to redo some of these choices we make.

So, Lent is a time of looking at those places in our own lives where we contribute to that brokenness. It is as Janet said in the children's sermon so wonderfully, a time when we have to listen a little bit more carefully, but that's not just an interior journey. It's an interior journey that has very dramatic repercussions for how we live our lives every single day. In fact, one of the dangers of Lent is about making it about our spirituality and not about how we live out in the world.

Some of you have read a wonderful book by C. S. Lewis, called *The Screwtape Letters* that purports to be a series of letters between a senior devil and a junior tempter, Screwtape writing to his nephew Wormwood. Screwtape is always trying to help Wormwood understand how to interfere with the Christian's journey. He says to Wormwood in one of his letters, "Keep the Christian spiritual and not practical because it is the practical that often brings people to God." So what I want to invite us all to do this week as we start this Lenten journey together is look for the places in which what you are doing has an impact on how we care for creation. And that happens at all levels in the way we live. It's as simple as changing a light bulb to a more energy effective light bulb. It can be eating less meat because, of course, meat production has a hugely adverse on the impact on the life of the world. It has to do with reglazing all those old windows that don't keep the heat in. It has to do with how we green our church, and some of the choices we make.

I'm going to throw us back a couple of years to our church's decision to start to recycle. I don't know if you remember this, but that was a source of some significant contention here. Because nobody wanted to see recycling bins in the halls of our church, it didn't look pretty, which it doesn't, they're not attractive, and I get that. But we have to make some sacrifices if we're going to start living out how we go about caring for creation. It may mean that we pay a little bit more for the electricity we use, so that we can build plants that are more environmentally conscious. It may mean that we may change our eating habits, that we change how we use our food. Our whole Campus Kitchen Project is built around reclaiming food that would otherwise go to waste. That's again a powerful place where environmental justice and social justice tie together. It means that when our President invites us to start looking intentionally at renewable sources of energy, we've got to make that a priority. We as Christians have got to vocalize our willingness to make that a priority.

V. Conclusion

We don't get a second chance at how we care for the Earth. John Wesley wrote, "I believe in my heart that faith in Jesus Christ can and will lead us beyond the exclusive concern for the wellbeing of other human beings to the broader concern for the wellbeing of the birds in our backyards, the fish in our river and every living creature on the face of the earth." We have been placed here by the Divine Hand, to care for, and to nurture our Earth, it is the first call that scripture records for us. I want to invite you as we enter this Lent, to find some place where you can start living that out today and as we move forward through this Lenten journey, towards the new life

God offers us in Easter. There's an ancient Jewish saying that goes, "If you are old, you must plant, just as you found trees planted by others, so you must plant them for your children."

Amen.

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