

February 10, 2008 - 1st Sunday in Lent

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

This past Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we began our Lenten Journey. For the few brave souls who ventured out in the winter storm of ice and snow, we had a very powerful service with a common of the imposition of ashes and the last time of sharing the bread and the cup around this table until Maundy Thursday. This table that John has dramatically bound as a symbol of our Lenten Journey. Our historic Scrooby baptismal font held the sacrificial and penitential flames that transformed the palms from last years celebration of Palm Sunday, the pine from our Advent Wreath and slips of paper with our confessions of brokenness, into the ashes for our communion.

Spiritual growth is the goal of the Lenten journey, expressed in the ancient word “conversion.” Unfortunately, the word “conversion” as become so associated with judgmental and condemning religious fundamentalism that is use in our cultural context is suspect. BUT, originally, the concept was about personal and social transformation—Not about forcing others to accept ones religious beliefs. Our Jewish ancestors believed that there are times when the divine calls us to **stop** in our journey through life and **turn around**. The Hebrew work for “turning” is *tshuvah*, it is translated in Latin as *conversio*, from which we get the English word *conversion* .

So Lent is a time of “turning.” The season gives us an opportunity to turn our lives around. We let go of practices and habits that separate us from the Divine and distort our relationships with our sisters and brothers in the human family and in the rest of nature. We open our minds and hearts to

God's love. We listen to God's word. We ask God to show us what is really important. We turn toward God.

Three spiritual practices are at the center of Lent for many Christian traditions: prayer, fasting, and acts of love and service. In your bulletin you will find a card that the Worship Committee prepared to help us connect our Lenten spiritual practices with our three missional priorities for this year:

1. Greening: environment justice and care for planet that God has placed into our care.
2. Migration: living out God's command to welcome and provide hospitality the foreigners in our midst.
3. Peace: ending the war in Iraq and turning our culture away for militarism and violence.

There are additional Lenten materials on the Table in the narthex that you may find helpful as you develop your spiritual practices this Lenten journey.

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Now let us enter into one of our spiritual practices, listening to Scripture.

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

¹⁵The God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

¹⁶And God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but 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."

³Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that God had made. The serpent said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?” ²The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³but 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.’” ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

⁶So 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. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened,

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Let us pray...

Our scripture reading this morning is the story of Eve and Adam eating the forbidden fruit.

The whole story of Eve and Adam in Genesis 2:5-3:24 is a **paradigm of the loss of the paradise and innocence of childhood**. The story tells how two youngsters, who had all their desires met in a perfect garden by a super-parent, gradually woke up to the realities of the adult world – sexuality, childbirth, and labor in the fields. And most of all, they woke up to **the reality of mortality**. They came to know that they would die – “you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:19, NRSV).

The critical transition from childhood innocence to adult awareness comes about by eating the fruit of the tree of knowing good and bad. (Hebrew *ra'*, “bad,” doesn’t normally have the weighty overtones of Anglo-Saxon “evil.”) This is a fruit that gives a **knowledge of consequences**, knowledge of what will happen if... This is the knowledge of the gods. It is the chief advantage that gods have over humans. (“See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil [bad]...” Genesis 3:22.) Therefore, this is the fruit that the man and the woman must not eat. They must not become like the gods.

There was another tree in the garden which also gave the gods a special power – **the tree of life**. (“...the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” Genesis 2:9.) Eating of this tree kept one from dying. This was among the trees it was OK for the humans to eat – until they had also eaten of the tree of knowledge. Then they had to be ejected from the garden, lest the man “reach out his hand and eat from the tree of life, and eat [that is, keep on eating], and live forever” (Genesis 3:22). Being ejected from the garden, from the carefree paradise of childhood, meant being subject to death, and having acquired knowledge of the ways of the world, it meant knowing of this death.

As it stands, this story is about disobeying the parental authority and in the process becoming mature adults – with all the pains and benefits appertaining thereto – in a real world instead of in the dream world of children. This story is *not* about sin; “sin” is not mentioned in Genesis until the story of Cain and Abel (4:7). In the Bible sin enters creation with Fratricide – when a human being kills another human being.

The story of Adam and Eve was a folk story. It is never referred to in ancient Israelite times. No historical, prophetic, or poetic book in the Jewish scriptures mentions it, much less quotes it. The story simply sat in Genesis for many centuries, enjoyed, no doubt, but making no big impression on Israelite writers.

The only use we know of for this folk tale in its present form, was as a didactic text for young men who have just reached puberty and are now learning to read and write in wisdom schools after the Babylonian exile. The texts they have to learn and recite are about their new stage of life.

The notion of “sin” that is inherited by all the human race, “original sin” first appeared in the Hellenistic age with the expansion of the Roman Empire.

The earliest reasonably clear reference outside of Genesis to Eve and the forbidden fruit is in the writings of Joshua Ben Sira about 150 BCE. One of his sayings is, “From a woman sin had its beginning, / and because of her we all die” (Ecclesiasticus [= Sirach] 25:24, NRSV). But it is clear from the totality of his writing that Ben Sira was a misogynist, he hated and feared women.

So from about 150 BCE up through the destruction of the Jerusalem in 70 CE the story of the forbidden fruit had begun to be the story of “original sin.”

Unfortunately for us, Paul uses this interpretation of the story as a way to try and explain the freedom to be found in following the Way of Jesus to folks in the Hellenistic culture of his time. Paul argues that following the Way of Jesus offers us a path to freedom, even from “original sin.”

The use of the “forbidden fruit” story by Paul within the Jesus Movement of his historical context, would not have prevented the Jesus Movement from relegating the story of Eve and Adam to its rightful place as a folk tale, like that part of Judaism that developed into the Rabbinic Judaism of today did. But the Jesus Movement was co-opted by the Roman Empire 313 CE. With the ability of the Empire to force conformity on the Church and create “orthodoxy”, the writings of Augustine, bishop of Hippo, who lived 354-430 CE were forced upon all the Latin-Speaking West. It was Augustine that developed the doctrine of “original sin”, along with much of the repressive and unhealthy understandings of human sexuality that have plagued the church up to the current day.

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With this short history lesson, I would like to invite us to return to the folk tale about **the loss of the innocence and knowledge of consequences.**

While this is a part of a healthy human development from childhood, through adolescences, to being an adult – my experience is that it is a life long process. As our eyes are opened to more and more of the complexities of life and the inter-connectedness of the web of life, we are aware of more and more consequences of our actions and the actions of our human family.

For those of us who have chosen to follow the Way of Jesus there was some point or process in our life experience that led us to decide that following the Way of Jesus was a way that helps us navigate the responsibilities of being adults and the

choices we have to make and understanding the consequences of our actions in the world.

In my life there were a number of experiences in my youth that shoved me out of the innocence of childhood and into the world of adults. In 1968, when I was 17 years old, there was a convergence of events that forced me to open my eyes in a lot of new ways. In '68 as the war raged in Vietnam, I went to Europe, Woodstock and the Democratic Convention and Dr. King was assassinated. The world had gone crazy and I wanted to find some place to escape, a sanctuary, some garden where the world of war and violence did not enter. I dropped out of high school and hopped a ship as a merchant seaman and sailed out under the Gold Gate Bridge across the Pacific. I had some amazing adventures in Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and the Philippines.

When I returned I was 18 years old and went home to visit my parents. One evening as my father and I were seated together on the porch I said with great sadness and heaviness of heart, "Al, I am an educated, white, North American male. I am the enemy." We looked in each others tearful eyes, stood and embraced and wept.

There was no where I could go to escape who I was and what the human family was doing to each other and the planet. I could only decide how I was going to take responsibility for the life I had been given.

Over the next several years, It was my encounter with the witness of people and communities that were struggling to faithfully live the Way of Jesus that helped me to decide follow that path; that helped me discover that my path to being an

authentic human being participating in the human families struggle to find our “Holy” place within God’s creation, was to try and follow the Path of Jesus. This was and is my path to “salvation.”

Lent provides me an opportunity each year to reflect on my faithfulness to that path and to further develop the spiritual disciples I need to stay on the path.

I pray that I use it well.

I pray that we all use it well.

Amen