

## LENT ONE, YEAR A, FEBRUARY 26, 2023

Today is the first Sunday in Lent and we begin with the story of the temptation of Adam and Eve. It is a rather simple, not literal story, about faith and morality which has been interpreted, reinterpreted, and misinterpreted for countless generations. In fact, this Genesis story has been used and misused to sow divisions and has been misread and misappropriated to sustain egregious notions especially about women. It is also important to note that the concept of original sin in Christianity evolved out of this story but not until the 4<sup>th</sup> century with the writings of St. Augustine of Hippo. The idea that we are all born sinful and condemned with that fault because of Adam and Eve's temptation didn't become a doctrine of the church until the 16<sup>th</sup> century. For the ancient Hebrew people and the writers of Genesis, the concept of original sin does not exist. In Judaism sin is an event not a person.

So, you can see why we need to look at this story with fresh eyes. The ancient Israelite's wrote this story as a people trying to discern who it is God has called them to be in the world. We too need to hear what this story may be saying to us, in our time, as people also seeking to discern God's call to us and who it is God has called us to be in this world and in this time?

The key to this question is actually found in the two verses that follow our Old Testament reading today. Those two verses say that when the man and the woman heard God in the garden they hid from God among the trees. But God called to the man and asked, 'Where are you?' The drama of the story all comes down to this often-overlooked question that God puts to Adam, "Where are you?" Now in asking this question, God is not asking Adam to show where he's hiding. This is not a hide and seek game nor a hide and seek question. This question is about much more than that.

To get to the impact of that question we need to relook at the very beginning of this story. We are told that God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and to keep it. As you know, the Hebrew word here that has been translated as "man" is "Adam," meaning "earth creature." At this point, there is no gender attached as this earth creature has not been identified as male or female, and indeed the point is not about gender at all. Rather it is to show the close relationship that human creatures have to the earth itself because the Hebrew word for earth is "Adamah." So from "Adamah" comes "Adam." It is a wonderful play on words to show the interconnectedness of divine creation. Unfortunately, translations don't often get the subtle puns the original Hebrew has.

So God puts Adam in the garden to till it and to keep it. Essentially, God's human creation has been given the responsibility to partner with God, in caring for what God has created. This is essentially what faith is all about. For faith is about nothing less than our "yes" to God's invitation to partner with God in doing the work that is required, so that our very world reflects the image of its divine creator.

We are a people of faith, who are to tend and keep the garden of God's world as God has created us to do. A hands off, laid back attitude toward the world is simply not an option for us. Being faithful to our very divine creation means that no matter how messy, how frustrating, and how disheartening the world may be, we cannot withdraw from it or passively exist in it. Rather we are to take an active role in our world. Silence, indifference, and apathy are not options for it is these things that are sinful and make us unfaithful to who God has created us to be. Bottom line, we cannot hide from our

responsibility as God's human creations. And so, it is God's question, "Where are you?" that is a question about faithfulness. "Where are you?" God asked Adam. Are you being faithful to who God has created you to be? Are you caring for God's world?

We also know from our Sunday School days that in the story of Adam and Eve we also have the Tree of Life and the Tree with Knowledge of Good and Evil. The human creature is not to eat from the Tree with Knowledge of Good and Evil, which means that the human creature is permitted to eat from any of the other trees, most notably from the Tree of Life. And herein lies what it means to be faithful to our very creation. For it is about caring for the Tree of Life, which represents nothing less than the life-giving expanse of God.

The Genesis story tells us that we now are the caretakers of the Tree of Life – God's sacred life giving essence. This means we are to respect, foster, and protect the sacred freedom of life that is in all of us and to do nothing to creation, or to one another, that might desecrate or take it away. But we see it happening every day and all around us and there is nothing more destructive than seeing another human being, being humiliated, belittled, put down, degraded, or destroyed in any way. We also need to recognize the sin of bigotry, inequality and poverty. To be faithful to our divine creation is for us to use our God given sacred liberty in a life-giving way, which means protecting and respecting the sacred space of others. This is what it means to be faithful and to partner with God. Our greatest temptation is to not recognize the divine extensiveness that resides in each of us and to believe that we ourselves are not worthy. For when we believe we are not worthy then we disrespect ourselves, others and God.

Ultimately the eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is rejecting God's truth about who we are. To care for all of God's creation is to keep the truth that is contained in God's question to Adam, "Where are you? Are we being faithful to who God has created each of us to be, caretakers of God's sacred expanse of life and keepers of God's divine truth.

Rosemary Radford Ruether, a catholic theologian says "sin is the misuse of freedom to exploit other humans and the earth and thus violates the basic relations that sustain life. Sin is whatever separates us from God's goodness and love.

Think about all the hateful, exclusive rhetoric that gets spewed out on a daily basis. Are we listening to that or are we listening to God's voice? Look around you: God clearly loves diversity? It is only we who prefer uniformity. Diversity is created and maintained in God's love just as unity is diversity embraced, protected and maintained by God's infinite generous love. It takes grace and love to achieve unity. Uniformity, on the other hand, is achieved through coercion, shame and fear. We forget that in God there is neither hierarchy nor inequality, neither division or competition but only unity in love amid diversity.

There is a wonderful film made 10 years ago called "Still Life". It is a story about a low level London bureaucrat named John May whose job is to find the next of kin for people who have died alone. And finding the next of kin for people who have died lonely and alone turns out to be quite a challenge.

It's a strange job but he loves it and he conducts his bureaucratic responsibilities with an obsessive-compulsive dedication to detail and, more importantly, with an incredible sense of the dignity of every person's life and death, no matter how obscure, how forgotten, or how alone.

Most surviving family members "refuse assistance," as May's bureaucratic form puts it. They want nothing to do with their dead relative when May calls them. No, they don't want any of the personal effects that May lovingly collected from their apartment. No, they won't attend the funeral. No, they won't help to pay for the burial, and no, there's no one else to call.

When those who died alone are abandoned even after death, May organizes their funerals. He writes their eulogies based upon the fragments that he can discover about them, attends their burials, and then spreads their ashes. He's the only person present in these sacred moments except for the lone priest or the grave diggers. He keeps a scrapbook of photos that he's made of those on whom he's bestowed such dignity — a family portrait, a driver's license, a worker ID card, or the odd newspaper clipping. Slowly and tenderly he contemplates the lost lives that are now gone. It takes your breath away to see how this man cares for these people exhibiting what it truly means to be respectful but most of all faithful to every God given living creature.

This is what it means to care for the tree of life. To recognize that we are all precious, we are all created out of the divine dust of God's expansiveness and we are called to see that not only in ourselves but every human being and living creature around us. As we enter this season of Lent let us celebrate the gift of life with all its blessings and sorrows and listen to the stories all around us about the goodness of life. Amen.