

“Lessons from the Fall”

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Lent 1, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

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Readings

Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12–19; Matthew 4:1–11

Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. (Romans 5:18)

I’m offering a bit of Bible study for you today, in this sermon: some lessons I have learned from the tale in the Bible familiarly known as The Fall of Humanity, and from some observations about that Fall that were composed by the apostle Paul.

It’s not as though I will be telling you anything you haven’t heard before. I’m shooting for repeating these lessons in ways you may not have thought about before. The three lessons are the three just about as central to Christianity as any: first, that we have free will but are prone to abuse it; second, that God is merciful and loving; and last, that because of Christ, we are recognizably able to surpass that first, painful reality.

We all know the characters in the story of the Fall, I think: Adam, Eve, a serpent, and God. We all know the environment: a garden planted by the Creator as the perfect centerpiece of creation, in which all creatures lived in peace and harmony.

But it is not as though everything within those creatures was peaceful and harmonic. Though the Creator was satisfied (in an earlier story, usually paired with this one by leading into it, the Creator has pronounced everything good, and the human beings very good), nevertheless not everyone else was so smitten with the way things were.

That serpent, and the woman, and the man turned out to be complex and complicated beyond – it would appear – even what their Maker had assumed, or intended. Each of them wished for an environment just a bit less idyllic and a lifestyle a little more challenging, a vision more captivating, a reality more intriguing.

From these conditions, a conflict sprang in a perfect world. Never mind the fact that everyone in this story appears a bit naïve (yes, including the serpent, and, yes, including the Creator); what we have here is a plot being unhatched. What we have is a Fall coming.

Now, the temptation would be to blame that nasty little serpent! If it weren’t for that stinker, sin would never have come into the world.

It’s fun to say that. . . mostly, I think, because it deflects the blame for the sin that arises, the disalignment of human perfection, the disconnection between humanity and deity. That’s what sin is, you know. We hesitate to talk about sin much, and as a result, we have conveniently been able to forget what sin means: it’s a break in relationship, intentional or unintentional. It is a disconnection from the Ground of our being, from the One who gives us purpose. We don’t enjoy imagining ourselves sinning intentionally; we prefer to imagine our misbehavior as if it were the result of misinformation or even disinformation. But that it might be our fault is an unpleasant thing to consider. It means that you and I have not been faithful, somehow. It is unpleasant to consider that we are the cause of our own fallen status, and so we find another to blame, in this case a snake.

Truth be told, we do this a lot, such deflecting, maybe without even thinking how ironic it is that we do it. We’ll say, our problems are caused by our environment, our genetic makeup, or — as in the case of Adam and Eve — “the devil made me do it.”

But what we’re called to do, in our Christian way of looking at the world, is not to *deflect* but to *reflect* upon our misdeeds and the resulting alienation from God. We are required to gaze

within ourselves and ponder the nature of our difficulties, and when we do, when we think about who we are and how it is that we so often follow our own way rather than the way in which we ought to go, there deep inside we have to acknowledge that there is no one else to blame for our wrongful actions but our selves.

That is the first lesson of the Garden of Eden: God has made us free to choose, but abusing our freedom so that we disregard our Maker's will, can destroy us.

Think about it.

This story goes far more familiarly than any of us very often like to admit. Sin and salvation were the choices, and Adam and Eve chose sin.

Fortunately, that is not the only lesson to learn. There is another that follows quickly on its heels, for us today. The second lesson is about who that Creator of ours turns out to be:

It's because of how things look to us human beings, I think, that Adam and Eve fell. And it's also why we fall so hard and so often. Things just don't appear to us the way that they actually are, and we become content to live within our unreality.

When we walk about under the stars, despite our vast knowledge of the universe, we imagine the earth as if it had a canopy slung over it. Stars are only as far away as the vault of the sky, we imagine; there are not the light-years, the light-centuries, the light-millennia separating their burning from us, their differences are indistinguishable. The moon follows us as we go. The sun rises, the sun sets.

But of course, none of this is the case. We are limited by our senses when we peer out at the cosmos. That we mistake the sky for an upside-down bowl and the stars for pinpricks of light is a matter of the Creator limiting our perspective by creating us in the first place.

That we feel as though we are at the center of the universe is only natural, considering our created-ness. But it is also wrong.

You know, it's when you get to this point that it's important to recognize that the story of Eden may be many things, but there is one thing it is not. It may be a magnificent illustration for the loss of childish innocence; it may be an ancient explanation for why we are the way we are, disobedient and wilful. Or why creatures of the same substance and species can be so different, in our genders and our inclinations. In its conclusion, which we didn't read this morning, it may even be a fitting theory of why snakes crawl on their bellies and frighten us when they slither past.

So, the story of Eden, of the Fall, thus may be *true*. But what it is not, like it or not, is history. That fact can lead us to the next important lesson, the one which is (as I said earlier) about God and just who God can be... for us and with us. For, by understanding what is not history, we can see all the more clearly what *the truth* is.

God is even more clever than we, and knows that Adam cannot be the only one who falls. Eve goes too, and Cain and Abel and Seth and you and I, and every generation of humanity that will walk this earth. It is part of our created-ness. The lesson to come to know about who our God is, is that God is merciful; or as John the Divine would more appropriately state it, "God is love."

So as we are falling, even once we've fallen, God offers us the chance to rise. This God, who would be rightly angry with us for our sinfulness, has the interior resources also to recognize that our sinfulness and straying is part of our created-ness. God, it turns out, is not so naïve as the story from Genesis 2 seems to indicate. Rather, God has recognized that a creation cannot save itself. The Creator has to offer a way out, has to be a Redeemer for it, too.

And from this arises the last lesson from the Fall, which is our rising above it.

"God made to be sin one who knew no sin," Paul realized. And "just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all."

When Paul said those words, Christianity found the capacity to become a world religion, with ultimate significance for people's lives. Paul saw something special in Jesus that even the apostles who actually knew the Messiah face-to-face failed to see.

Paul looked to the death and the rising... things that had spelled victory to his predecessors, but which had otherwise left them wondering.

He knew there had been plenty enough teachers and radicals who had died for what they believed in. Socrates, Pythagorus, and others who believed that the world would be better if people would just treat each other right had already paid with their lives for their theories of ethics and morality. But this was more than a matter of morality. Gods and demigods of old after their dying had been raised up — Baal, Dionysus, Mithra, among others. But for Paul, his understanding was more than a matter of getting the myth right.

For Jesus had suffered a fate worse than just death. Socrates drank hemlock, Pythagorus died at the point of a sword. Both their deaths were quick and relatively, at least, without shame. Each was given at least the honor of their social standing in their dying.

Jesus, on the other hand, was convicted of sedition and blasphemy without clear cause, tortured before he was executed, and then killed without any shred of dignity left. Stripped, exposed, he was nearly dead when they hung him up, his life ending on a device used to execute ill-behaved slaves and traitors to an empire.

Paul considered *that humiliation*, considered also the undying nature of Jesus' teaching, that the teaching itself was eternal. Indeed, the rabbi had not stayed dead; like his word, his Spirit lived on. God's Word was living on.

Thus into a sinful world, God presented one who could reverse human sin. Cosmically, Jesus is necessary because we human beings long ago recognized that for us to live as God would have us live, being human is not enough. You need the resources of a God, and you cannot have them by yourself.

Recognizing that — as with everything — if God does not take the initiative with us, there will rarely be anyone to take the initiative toward reconciliation. God therefore presented to us one who would resist temptation, would willingly make sacrifice of self in order to save others.

Jesus, in innocence, lived and worked and taught and died so that a sinful humanity might see and know, and be saved. I say, "in innocence," and you might be given to think that the job could have been equally as well accomplished by an animal or a human child, but neither of them has the ability to choose between what is right and what is wrong. It had to be an adult; it had to be someone who could decide which way to go, and when faced with the ultimate decision which way to go — whether or not to remain in relationship with God, even though God would demand more than the human could abide — would have the capacity to say "No". . . but still would say, "Yes."

Through Christ, God has demonstrated to us that deity and humanity can live in unity, and peace, and offer eternal life to those who would otherwise be merely mortal.

And as the Church, as those who have received Christ's Spirit through our own invitation and through baptism, as those who have been born both of the Water and of that Spirit, we offer our witness and our support to others, who will experience what we have experienced in our living as well: who will fall and may rise again as we all have throughout our lives.

Those are the lessons from the Fall:

- because we have free will, we are prone to abuse it by disregarding our relationship with the One who made us
- but that same Maker loves the creation so much that a way has been provided for us out of the depth of our failing (in short, "God is merciful; God is love")

- so, though we may fall, God will always be there to lift us up.

That last lesson that we learn from the Fall, is also the most important. *Every time anyone falls*, God will be there to lift them up. (Or, I suppose, if they want to lift themselves up, God will rejoice with them in the rising, never condemning, always welcoming.)

And, we pray that we will live as we say we ought — relying on the Deity's counsel to direct our humanity, so that we may live as we ought and as others need, by Christ's example, in Jesus' name.

Amen.