BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Lent 1 (A)
February 26, 2023

[RCL] Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

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

As we approach the narrative of creation and sin found in Genesis, chapters 2 and 3, it is important to keep in mind the context of this passage within the book of Genesis itself. Genesis 2-3 represents a separate creation story from Genesis 1 and, therefore, a distinct theological viewpoint and purpose (if you'd like to compare the different creation stories, read both Genesis 1 and 2, taking note of the different "timelines" of creation). Immediately prior to this text is the separate creation narrative of Genesis 1 and the beginning of the Genesis 2 narrative in which *Adam* (which is a Hebrew word representing humankind, more than a proper name) is made from the *adamah*, the soil of the ground. The Hebrew of this text shows us the deep connection between the name Adam and the soil, a connection maintained in English with *human* and *humus*. Immediately following this text are the consequences of Adam and Eve's decision to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

A close reading of this text, along with the passage that follows, reveals a somewhat unexpected (and potentially troubling) revelation: the serpent never lies to Eve. In his craftiness, the serpent says that humans will "be like God, knowing good and evil." Just a handful of verses later in chapter 3, verse 22, God says "the humans have become like one of us, knowing good and evil." This means that Adam and Eve were not necessarily deceived by the serpent but offered a temptation that each of us encounters at some point or another: to seek to become like God rather than embrace our dependence on God.

- Having reflected on this passage, how would you describe Adam and Eve's decision? How would you describe the serpent?
- In what ways does the sin of trying to "be like God" still affect our lives? What are some contemporary examples of trying to "be like God"?

Psalm 32

Like all of the psalms, Psalm 32 contains extremely visceral, concrete language to describe spiritual realities. The psalmist describes the experience of keeping sins silent as the wasting away of the body. When reading Hebrew poetry like the Psalms, keeping an eye to physical imagery can give us an insight into the embodied spirituality intrinsic to the Old Testament. For example, the word most commonly translated as "soul" in the English translations of the Psalms, *nefesh*, literally means "throat" in Hebrew. The rawness of Hebrew

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poetry, as exemplified by the Psalms, takes us into a world where our souls are in our throats and our spirits are not separated from our experience.

In this psalm, we encounter a primary theme of repentance (literally turning away from sin) and the effect that keeping our mistakes hidden can have on us. In so many ways, we know well the damage that failing to acknowledge our shortcomings can have on ourselves, our neighbors, and the world around us. Take, for example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-Apartheid South Africa as a real, lived expression of this psalm. Telling the truth about our sins alone cannot fix them, but it is necessary for us to heal and grow into the love and salvation freely offered to us by God.

- Have you ever made a mistake, but been unable to admit to it?
- Have you ever admitted to a mistake out loud? How did you feel afterwards?
- How might we learn to be honest about our faults as a church and a society without letting these faults paralyze us with guilt? Might this psalm give us encouragement?

Romans 5:12-19

In this passage, we find two primary theological subjects: 1) the "free gift" of grace and 2) justification through righteousness. In English, the words "free gift" appear five times in this passage. However, in Greek, Paul bounces back and forth between two different words that have both been translated as "free gift": *charisma* and *dorea*. The latter is used almost exclusively in the New Testament to describe a spiritual gift from God. The former, which may sound familiar to us, describes the power and grace of God's Spirit moving in our lives. This is where we get the word "charisma," a trait of someone with exceptional passion, and the word "charism," a person or community's clear sense of call to a particular ministry or spiritual gift. In either case, both words describe a similar reality: the grace of God is truly a gift. Gifts cannot (and should not) be earned, but rather accepted and enjoyed.

When we encounter the topic of righteousness in scripture, it is common to imagine the inner spiritual landscape of a person or people group. In many of our contexts, righteousness is thought of as personal moral excellence, which is certainly an element of righteousness. However, whenever we encounter this term in the scriptures (both Hebrew and Greek), it almost always has a dual meaning: a righteousness that is justice and a justice that is righteousness. In the ancient mindset, social justice required personal righteousness and true personal righteousness required a real and active concern for others, especially the poor and the oppressed. So, the "justification" in verses 16 and 18 could just as easily be read as "justice-ification." Remembering this can help us avoid drifting into a view of Paul as a theoretical theologian calling us only to personal righteousness but rather into a real, incarnated justice-righteousness.

- What is the best gift you've ever received?
- When you receive a gift, how do you feel? A need for reciprocity? A sense of being cared for?
- How might thinking of the Holy Spirit as a gift change or enrich our shared life as the Church?

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Matthew 4:1-11

In this passage, we get to experience Matthew's take on Jesus' temptation in the wilderness by the Tempter (I've chosen to capitalize this as a way to provide a name for this character while avoiding the rightfully loaded term "devil"). Each of the four gospels has a particular take on the person of Jesus the Christ and, therefore, a particular theological viewpoint about Jesus's ministry, personality, and purpose. Matthew's gospel represents a Jesus who is deeply rooted in Torah and expressed his Messianic power primarily through authoritative interpretation of Torah. Matthew's Jesus, then, is able to criticize the Pharisees and scribes not because he is diametrically opposed to them but because he is the fullest expression of their love of and devotion to the Torah, which in Hebrew literally means "instruction." Matthew's Jesus is primarily concerned with the maintenance of Torah while inviting Gentiles into its full expression.

We see this Torah-guided Jesus most clearly in this text in his responses to the Tempter. While the Tempter does use scriptural references in his first two temptations to bread and miraculous base-jumping, Jesus uses scripture to respond to all three of the temptations. What's more, Jesus quotes exclusively from the book of Deuteronomy, seen before, during, and after his day as a book that epitomizes the Torah. In this passage, we see a Jesus who has fully embraced and embodied his Jewish identity in order to respond to the temptations and struggles that will be ever-present in his ministry: power for power's sake.

- In our own day, how might we follow this Jewish Jesus in building strong habits of spiritual groundedness?
- What practices or resources in our tradition can come to our aid when we are presented with our own temptations to apathy, prejudice, and animosity?

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