

March 13, 2011 Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 5:12-19; Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

THE CONTRADICTION OF THE CROSS

Pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

These 40 days of Lent, from Ash Wednesday to Easter “are among the most countercultural and subversive in the church year. Confession of sin, focus upon death, honesty about temptation – these matters do not come naturally to us. We live in a success-worshipping, power-seeking, feel-good culture. Lent moves us in another direction.” Writes Bishop William H. Willimon of the United Methodist Church. [William H. Willamon, *Pulpit Resource*, 2005]

There is also a contradiction within our Scripture texts today. The Genesis passages paint a very stark picture of the beginning of human sin. Then Paul sings a beautiful song about the victory Christ Jesus won on the cross. And in Isaiah 2, the prophet talks about the coming, peaceable, kingdom of God, where all of creation will live in peace, as it did at the beginning, in Eden, before sin entered the picture.

Scripture tells us that God created human beings to be in relationship with Him, and God connected the first creatures to the place of the garden – earthling to earth, if you will. It was a delicate and intentional relationship. The human creature cared for the earth, and the earth sustained the human.

Adam is given a task in the garden. The garden cannot exist by itself, and neither can Adam exist by himself. The garden requires work, intention and care. Adam is to keep the garden, but is also permitted to enjoy it. The accent is on freedom. “Freely eat,” God says, even of the tree of life!

But there was one prohibition. Adam was not to eat from the tree capable of death – the tree offering the knowledge of good and evil. This tree was dangerous because it had the potential to disrupt the ordered life of the garden. Adam and Eve had a world full of yeses with only one no. It should have been easy for the first humans.

Then the snake entered the picture. Scripture describes this creature as crafty. He cannot create or transform, as does Almighty God. All the serpent can do is talk, but his speech is cunning, calculated and powerfully manipulative. Inching up to Eve, that old snake speaks.

First he asks what God said, and then he contradicts what God said. And in those two little exchanges, the serpent takes humankind out of the zone of God's faithful speech, out of the practice of truth, and into the realm of doubt and fear.

After the first couple ate the forbidden fruit, the Bible tells us that Adam and Eve suddenly knew they were naked. Now the problem was not that they weren't clothed; what Scripture is telling us is that the problem was that their innocence was shattered and had been turned into fear.

The relationship between God and His creatures, Adam and Eve, which had been one of innocence, trust, and love, was now a relationship of fear. So the humans went into hiding.

The terrible work of the serpent was done. The relationship was broken, and humanity was banned from the Garden, separated from God by disobedience and by their desire to be like God, rather than being content to be God's beloved creatures. The horrible result of all of this is that death entered the picture; not just the death of the body, but the real meaning of death – which is separation from God's presence.

Humanity wandered around the face of the earth, getting into all sorts of trouble, but God never abandoned His people. The Old Testament chronicles God's efforts to restore the relationship that Adam and Eve had broken, culminating in the incarnation of God's own Son, who finally repairs the damage that was done in Eden.

It is in Adam that sin and death entered the world, because sin is the breaking of the relationship between God and humanity. And it is in Jesus Christ that grace entered the world because Jesus did what we could not do: He restored the relationship. Adam brought sin and death; Jesus brought grace and life.

Max Lucado writes: "The Bible is the story of two gardens: Eden and Gethsemane. In the first, Adam took a fall. In the second, Jesus took a stand. In the first, God sought Adam. In the second, Jesus sought God. In Eden, Adam hid from God. In Gethsemane, Jesus emerged from the tomb. In Eden, Satan led Adam to a tree that led to his death. From Gethsemane, Jesus went to a tree that led to our life." [Daily Devotion, Feb. 18, 2011]

“Lent is not the time of ‘bad news’ that precedes the ‘good news’ of Easter. It is a time of grace when the people of Christ reflect on their mortality and sin, as well as on the creative and re-creative power of God by which women and men are saved.

“The old Adam’s failure is redeemed by the new Adam’s grace, a victory celebrated in [Psalm 32 which we read as our Call to Worship]. In this Psalm there is joy over sin forgiven and wise counsel to ‘be glad’ and ‘rejoice.’” [Texts for Preaching, Year A, p. 182]

The peaceable kingdom that is pictured in Isaiah 2 and in Revelation 21 and 22 – where we are restored to Eden – is in the process of being fully realized because of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.

So even in Lent, when we bury the “Alleluia” for a time, when we realize our own failures and the failures of humanity down through the ages, we know that in Jesus we are forgiven, freed from sin and death. And our relationship with God our Creator is restored.

Lent is a time for truth-telling. We have the courage to tell the truth about ourselves because “as Paul says to the Romans, though our sin was serious, in Christ ‘grace abounded.’ Our misdeeds are abundant, as we admit every time we pray a prayer of confession. Yet, as Paul says, in Christ we have received abundant grace. [William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, 2005]

Commenting on these passages in Genesis and Romans, Bishop Willimon writes: “The good God who should have punished us for our failure to be good, instead loved us back into relationship with God. This is the great, wonderful contradiction of the cross, the great contradiction of Lent upon which rests our hope in life and in death.” [Ibid.]

Please pray with me. “Almighty God, in our weakness, you come to us in your strength. In our waywardness, you move toward us with forgiveness. Be with us during these 40 days of Lent and teach us that, having repented and confessed our sin, we might eagerly receive your forgiveness.” [Ibid] Through Jesus Christ, who was tempted as we are, and through whom we have received grace upon grace. Amen.

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