

Lent 1A
3/5/17
Wren Blessing

Embraced by Mercy
“*mercy embraces those who trust in the LORD.*” (Ps 32.11b)

In my little family, theological debates seem to spring up at inconvenient moments; typically, from the back seat of the car while I’m driving. A few weeks ago, I was focused on navigating icy roads when a little voice piped up from the back seat: “Why does God make us die?”

And before I could organize my thoughts to offer an enlightened and pastoral response, I heard my 7 year old answer in a scornful, all-knowing tone: “God doesn’t make us die. We die because Eve and Adam ate the fruit.”

That pretty much clarifies things, right?

And just now, we read the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent, and I didn’t hear that Genesis reading primarily as a story about death.

Let’s go back to it.

The man is in the garden, given a vocation – to till and tend and to bring forth life.

And he is given permission to eat everything he sees that’s good for eating.

Except one thing. There’s the prohibition that we remember about this story.¹ God says, “as soon as you eat [this fruit], you shall die.” Then our reading jump ahead. [We skip over the crowning of creation with Eve’s presence in the garden.]

And we hear a serpent asking questions of Eve. With his questions, the serpent is skewing God’s voice just slightly. Eve *desires* the fruit: she sees that it is beautiful, good to eat, and a fruit that bears wisdom, and she wants it. Who wouldn’t?

Eve doesn’t say anything about her desire. She doesn’t talk about her desire for the fruit with God or with Adam or with the animals. Maybe she’s ashamed. Rather than talk, she acts.

Eve eats. Adam eats, and they start feeling anxious and self protective and naked. We know that feeling of panicked anxiety from our own experience.

This is where today’s reading stops, but the story doesn’t stop here. Eve and Adam are afraid and ashamed, they hide. This fear and anxiety and alienation, though, is not the last words of this story. We knew that painful consequences would follow their choice to eat the fruit: we expected as much. We heard what God said. The miracle, the surprise of the story is that they live, that they are shown mercy, that they are invited – *still* – to trust in God who remains compassionately trustworthy, even when Adam and Eve feel they can’t trust themselves or their own desires.

¹ See Brueggemann, Walter. *Genesis: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982).

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The story in the garden shows us, from the very beginning of human experience, that our God has mercy to spare. God is rich in mercy. And we see that that God longs for relationship with humanity. That is God is rich in mercy is a really good thing, because its not even noon, and we've asked God for mercy now more than a dozen times. These Lenten prayers for mercy are not a kind of groveling to get God to hear us and help us. ("God," Augustine says, is already "closer to us than we are to ourselves.") We pray together in order to recognize, to remember, to rejoice that God is compassionate and merciful. And we do that by starting in the place we find ourselves this morning. Because we're human, we're in of forgiveness, or reorientation, or new life. We start where we are today because....where else can we start?

I remember as a freshman in college, I'd been away from home for a while. Days turned into weeks, and as time passed I was struck by how much I missed and longed for human touch. I wanted a hug, a hand on my shoulder, someone to lean into on the couch. (Evidently I wasn't invited to the liquor soaked parties where college students work out their need for human touch in other ways.) Anyway, I was still a teenager, 18 years old, and I felt a little ashamed that I longed for companionship so much; like there was something wrong about my not being totally self-sufficient.

One Sunday morning during those months, I accidentally attended an Anglican liturgy. (I thought I was getting on a bus to a different church.) When I walked in and overcame the shock of being the wrong place, and finally figured out what page we were on, I was struck by the beauty of the prayers we shared. At the Eucharist, though, I wasn't sure how to receive. There were several communion stations. Finally, I got in line at a communion station in the back of the nave. I received the bread from the priest. And then the chalice bearer, a middle aged Irish woman, looked into my eyes, which were welling up with tears, and she said in her gorgeous brogue- "the blood of Christ, the cup of salvation." She smiled and - still holding the chalice - and managed to reach out and wrap her arms around me and hug me. Whether she knew it or not, that morning, she met me with joy in my humanity, in my place of need. The psalmist says that "mercy embraces those who trust in the LORD." The chalice bearer that day showed me what it looks like to be embraced by mercy.

So if I could go back to Adam and Eve's story and freeze the frame, I'd stop Eve the moment when she sees that the fruit of the tree is good for food, a delight to the eyes, and desired for wisdom. I'd stop her right then. I'd try to convince her that she can trust God, that she can speak to God even about desires that make her feel ashamed. I'd try to convince her to tell God about her desire and so discover that God is rich in mercy and full of love.

This trusting God with our desires is a first, uncomfortable step in our Lenten discipline. We are now in a season set aside for speaking to God about, trusting God even with the desires and actions that we prefer not to acknowledge, that we don't want

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to explore too deeply; that we'd rather keep hidden. Maybe today I acknowledge to God my greed, my continual longing for more and more and more. Maybe today I talk to God about my desire for relationships that seem out of reach, or my desire for power that I don't have, or my urge to withdraw, to hide when life circumstances are too overwhelming. This is a season in which we turn to God, trust God with our longings, even when – like Eve - we express them in a disordered way.

Lent is also a season for companionship. During these weeks leading up to Easter, our tradition invites us to make a particular priority of listening to one another, in order to acknowledge and to work prayerfully to meet one another's needs. Sometimes we get the idea that Lent is a solitary form of high intensity training with prayers repeated like burpees. But we are not self-sufficient. In this season, "part of the nourishment we need is knowing that our sisters and brothers in faith see and hear our needs *as they are*, not as others imagine them to be."² We enter the discipline of listening to others' needs, and we share our own. This is a time to risk identifying one or two companions in faith, to listen to them, to speak openly about our own needs, hopes, and desires, and to pray together. The Cistercians call this practice, "spiritual friendship;" friendship that leads into deeper friendship with God.

These weeks ahead offer us space to work to trust God with our desires, and the needs and desires of our neighbors. This trust requires courage, daily resolve. It takes the kind of inner strength that Jesus showed us in the desert; clarity and focus and commitment. In Lent, we daily ask the Holy Spirit to give us a share this perseverance and courage, and we take it hour by hour, day by day. As Lent unfolds before us, may we find courage to name before God, to trust God and one another with our desires, anxieties, and needs. In that risky trust, may we find ourselves embraced by restored relationship, by mercy that inspires us to reach out and to mercifully embrace one another. *Amen.*

² See Rowan Williams. *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 37.