Sermon for the Great Vigil of Easter

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Saturday, March 31, 2018

Text: John 20:1-18

Title: The art of precious scars

A few mornings ago, I was getting ready for the day while my children played together in a nearby bedroom when I heard a curious “crack.” My seventeen-month-old son soon toddled into the closet, holding up his hands and saying, “Boke. Boke.” I looked down to see in one hand the frame of a tiny toy car, and in the other the red shell that just a few minutes ago had rested atop it. “Boke.” He insisted. Broke.

As I kneeled down to help, my three-year-old joined us, announcing, “I can fix this for you.” She took the two pieces from her baby brother, and began somewhat comically smashing them together, waiting for them to magically click into one. After several failed attempts, she lamented, “It’s not working.” Almost done with brushing my hair, I encouraged her to give it a few more tries. She gave her full attention to the pieces, a serious, studious little person at work, her brother fully engrossed in watching her as I crouched down to assist. A long minute or so later, she cried, “I did it! I did it, momma!” I oohhed and ahhed and told Safina how impressed I was that she had stuck with the task, adding, “isn’t it interesting how it is so much harder to fix something than to break it?”

An impressive display piece is knocked off a shelf, and it will take hours to glue it back together. The bumper crunched up in a fraction of a second, but will take days to repair. A bone is broken in a moment, and it will be many weeks until it heals. A heart is shattered with just a few words, and, it can take a lifetime to feel whole – or simply feel - again. Now, not to over-simplify things, but this reality is at the heart of how Christians have traditionally understood salvation history. It has been our primary lens on the magnificent arc we remember tonight from creation and blessing, through estrangement and shame, into bondage and liberation, wanderings and arrivals, eras and exiles, and, finally, incarnation, proclamation, death, and resurrection.

Tonight’s first reading recounts verse after evocative verse of God bringing order out of a chaos, the primary, primal concern of ancient religions: the fixing or repair of nothingness into somethingness. It took seven whole days - which we can understand metaphorically, allegorically, as expansively as possible, to mean the wholeness of time, a perfection of time – for God to create the universe. To bring light of darkness. Separate waters and dry land. Set
lights in the sky. Create life: vibrant, stunning, a multiplicity of forms and features. And how long did it take Adam and Eve to disrupt that order? As long as it takes to bite into an apple. A few words. A few seconds.

So these first people are sent out of the garden, grieving God’s heart, where they toil to sustain themselves, quickly succumbing to jealously, suspicion, murder, and corruption. Another problem in need of fixing. So God sends a flood, only first a righteous man is chosen, and he hurriedly constructs an arc and fills it with those glorious animals, and forty days later there is a new creation, all bright and fresh and shiny. Life once again emerges from the waters, a dove descending as God hallows this new beginning. It was catastrophic but effective. But still catastrophic, so God promises to never again go to such extremes. No matter how much people might mess things up again, the little red button is now off limits.

To kick things off in this new world, God tries something new. A covenant with the earth, with every living being. A promise to support and sustain life, and nurture its flourishing. Well, you can guess how things go. Just six short verses after God finishes proclaiming this ever so hopeful covenant, Noah gets drunk, and soon he is pronouncing curses upon his three sons. One will rule. One will be a slave to other. The third will live as an alien among them. Think of how much effort and energy went into resetting the scene: convincing Noah to listen, herding all those critters aboard, forty full days of rain. And with just a few words - a misunderstanding that caused the father some shame - the human family is once again divided and set at odds with one another.

It only gets worse from there. Another problem in need of fixing. God realizes that something must be done, only flooding the place is no longer an option. So God tries something new. Instead of aiming to refurbish all of creation in one fell swoop, God makes a covenant with a single person, Abraham, and his descendants, and decides to accomplish the blessing of the world through this chosen lineage. It takes a lot of work. Years and years of walking with Abraham, calling him, making promises, before the trust between them is cemented and a son, Isaac, is born. All is restored. For a time. And then …

Well, look, I’d love to keep telling this story, but we’re only at the twenty-second chapter of Genesis! We haven’t even gotten to tonight’s second reading, which comes from the book of Exodus, just the second book of the bible. Suffice it to say that this pattern continues throughout scripture, and throughout history. The people become enslaved, and God liberates them. They
wander in the wilderness, and God sustains them and brings them to the Promised Land. They are divided, and God gives them judges. The judges become unjust, and God ushers in the monarchy, and so on and so on. But for some reason, nothing quite sticks.

For much of Christian history, theologians and priests would say that this is where Jesus comes in: to finally fix what had previously been unfixable. To offer a permanent solution to an inherent flaw in the system. Paul, and later Augustine, point to that first moment of estrangement in the garden, seeing Jesus as a new Adam, a man capable of repairing what was shattered and lost under the shade of the tree of life: the trust, love, and fidelity between God and creation. There’s a kernel of truth here for sure, but it’s important we don’t ignore or overlook all of those moments of intervention in between. After all, this story didn’t begin in the garden. It began in creation. It didn’t begin with original sin, but with original blessing: with our being created in the very image of God.

I don’t believe for a second that all those times Got intervened in history were accidental or futile. Jesus didn’t only come into the world to fix a problem. Jesus came into the world because God is constantly coming into the world, constantly joining us in our struggles and sufferings. So what does this arc of history show us then? Critically, that God’s approaches change over time. They become less destructive, less diffuse, more intimate, more particular, more personal. God is willing to try new and different things and see how they unfold. And we, though we do keep fumbling and falling, we also grow and learn and change in this relationship so that by the time we get to the life of Jesus, the resurrection of Christ, God is not simply fixing an old crack, a faulty design. Instead, God is bringing to fulfillment what God has been doing all along: using the broken places as the very site of renewal. Bringing light out of darkness, song out of sorrow, and life out of death. “Ring the bells that still can ring,” sings Leonard Cohen. “Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”

By the time we get to Jesus, we are not a problem needing fixing. Because one of the new things revealed in the life of Jesus is that God is not only creator, judge, rock, source. God is also parent. Father. Mother. Compassionate caregiver. When Safina clicked that car back together after all her long frustration, she was overjoyed. She had accomplished something. She had learned something. And with her momma crouching nearby to celebrate, we were, together, showing her brother that someday he would do the same. If I can want this for my children, how
much more must God want it for us – not that we would be left to our own devices to fix things, but would know that, together, we will find a way forward.

The arc of salvation history not only bends towards justice, it bends toward reconciliation with God, so that by the time we get to resurrection, God is no longer intervening from afar, but moving in and through us to accomplish wholeness, healing, hope, that we, with God, living a resurrected life, participated in this miraculous reunion. We become, indeed, agents of it. Now this doesn’t mean we will never stray, never make mistakes, never break what once seemed whole or good or strong. It simply means that, when we do, God will work through us and with us to begin again.

There is an ancient Japanese practice – until recently a long-forgotten craft - called kintsugi. When we drop a bowl or precious vase and it shatters into countless pieces, we will tend to see it as ruined, sweep up the debris, and throw it away in frustration. But for hundreds of years, there has been an alternative: joining the fragments back together with a precious metal – often liquid gold or liquid silver – resulting in a completely unique and, as far as the Japanese are concerned, more refined piece. It has been referred to as “the art of precious scars.” The goal is to enhance the seams, the broken places, not hide them, and the results are breathtaking. The threads of glittering metal testify to the wear and usefulness of the thing, which in many cultures is more highly valued than its newness or perfection, telling us a story about its history and its resilience, and also testifying to the creativity and commitment of the one willing to reset it.

Happy Easter, dear ones. May the God who is repairing, refining and reconciling all creation, even now and unto eternity, redeem what once seemed lost in your life, restore your broken pieces, and envelope you in resurrection life. Amen.