

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by The Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, March 13, 2011.

(Genesis 2:15-17; 3-17; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11)

Hear again these words from Genesis: "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked." These are hopeful words. Hopeful, you may wonder? "The eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked." Hopeful?

The man and the woman had a perfect life in the Garden of Eden, but then they were tempted by that crafty serpent. Hope? We might be tempted to skip this chapter in the story of creation. Why tell a story in which God creates man and woman and gives them a perfect life, but then punishes them and kicks them out of paradise? Why tell a story that has inspired humans over the centuries, the millennia, to hate themselves for their original sin? Why tell a story that has been used for so long to blame and punish women? I mean, come on, folks, Eve may have eaten first, but it clearly says in the story that the man was there the whole time.

Why tell this story? It does not sound like a story of hope. Nor are we typically inclined to use the word "hope" in association with the season of Lent, the season that we began on Ash Wednesday and today we begin with the special recitation, the singing of The Great Litany. For those of you who are visiting, we don't do that every Sunday, by the way. But it is Lent, forty days -- well, we're down to a few less than that now -- of repentance, self denial, fasting, self examination, study, prayer -- are you tired yet? Hopeful? Hopeful? On the contrary, it sometimes can feel like a drawn-out guilt trip. There's all this pressure to give something up or do something extra. When we fudge on our fast or forget to say our prayers, we feel even worse because it's Lent, we're supposed to be good.

During Lent at St. Luke's, we go back to Rite I during our worship with all of the penitential language about being unworthy. And I know for some of you, Rite I is a breath of fresh air because that's what you grew up with. For some of us, it feels like wallowing around in an ash bin. Then there are all these extra church services that we're supposed to attend. There was Ash Wednesday and pretty soon there will be Holy Week. Well, thank goodness the rector's on sabbatical this year, because we won't feel as guilty if we miss a few. I'm thinking we should just cancel Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and just -- I won't tell if you don't. What do you think? I mean, Easter will be just as hopeful, won't it? Won't it?

I'm thankful to Duke Divinity School professor Jeremy Begbie who pointed out to me and a group of clergy and musicians this week at a conference that hope requires tension. We cannot hope if we are comfortable. Hope requires a desire for something better. A desire requires that something must be missing in order for us to yearn for it. If we sing the songs of Easter all year round, if we skip the tension of Lent, if we omit the story of original sin, then what are we yearning for? We need desire and tension. Without desire, there's no real joy, no real life. We

can't skip Lent and its yearning for God and go straight to a nice candy-coated Easter. Well, we could, and many do. But where's the hope?

I say that the story of Adam and Eve and their original sin is a hopeful story because it's not the only story in the Bible, although some people like to think that it is. It's the beginning of a greater story. Their eyes were opened and humanity thus began its journey toward being more like God, knowing good and evil. Hope. But they also saw that they were naked. We sense Adam and Eve's embarrassment and shame as they scramble to cover themselves with leaves as they turn away and hide from God. Do you ever think of hiding from God as a way to think about sin? Hiding from God? Adam and Eve will accuse one another. They'll go on to have sons, one of whom will commit a jealous murder. Where's the hope in a world where earthquakes and tsunamis can take the lives of so many people in the blink of an eye? Where's the hope in a world where humans can be so cruel to each other?

Well, the hope is that the story is not finished. In the Bible, God may force Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden, He may deny them the tree of life, God doesn't want them to live forever, but it's only because they're not ready yet. They are not ready for eternal life because they're stuck in their shame. They've misapplied the knowledge of good and evil. They looked at themselves and all they saw was shame when God made them good. The story's got to go on because God's not finished with us yet. God wants us to have eternal life, but only when we're ready to show mercy and to see things the way God does. It would be cruel and unusual punishment for God to give us eternal life still stuck in our shame.

God's been working with us from the beginning, and God still works with us. God sent the prophets to give the law, to give the best ways to live together. And when that didn't work, God sent Jesus, God in human form, to feel the tension of temptation with us and to help us find hope in the struggle. To show us how to live, Jesus died and rose again. But the story is still going on. In the midst of all the struggles that humanity faces -- the earthquakes, the wars, the oppression, the death -- the story is still going on. One day when God decides that we're ready, we will finally enter into that eternal life that Adam and Eve were denied. Through Christ, our eyes will be opened completely and we will see, not that we are naked, but that we are justified and righteous in the eyes of God.

One of my favorite verses in Revelation says of the end times, "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." If we do not have tears, we can have no hope that God will wipe them away. The question is, can we choose hope? Somehow or another sin came into the world, and sin is still with us. We continue again and again to turn away from God, to hide from God, and this condition will likely be with us until the end of the story. The choice is not whether we will go on sinning, because we will. The choice is whether or not we will hope, and that brings us back to Lent. Lent is a season of choosing hope, choosing resurrection, choosing to hope for a new life, but we can't have hope without tension.

So in the words of the Ash Wednesday service, I invite you to the observance of a holy Lent. And let me add to that, a hopeful Lent, a Lent with some tension, a Lent with some desire, a Lent that takes us to places in ourselves where all we can say is, "I need you, God." A holy Lent, a hopeful Lent will bring us to our knees so that we can desire to stand anew. A holy Lent of

fasting and prayer and self denial, it's not just hopeful for us, it's hopeful for the whole world. When we come together to observe this Lent, we are telling the world God is not done with us yet. So let us be hopeful in our fasts and creative in our fasts in the witness we bear to one another, to ourselves and to the world.

I read an article this week about Lent and about fasting from another Divinity School professor at Duke, Amy Laura Hall. She points out in this article that for some people, especially for some women, fasting and self denial are not Lenten disciplines, they are permanent and destructive habits -- anorexia, for example. It would be kind of cruel of me to stand up here and say, "You need to fast more." Has thousands of years of blaming the woman for eating the forbidden fruit somehow led to women starving themselves and men starving themselves? So while many of us sometimes will give up chocolate for Lent, Dr. Hall's advice is that women who are terrified of eating, men who are terrified of eating, should eat more chocolate for Lent. She writes, "As a Lenten practice, in order to habituate toward the mean of temperance, some women, and perhaps some men too, might need to eat exactly what they fear and love in order to open themselves to God's blessing." We might need to eat exactly what we fear.

We fast not to punish ourselves, but we fast in the hope that our hunger will be filled. The self that we deny is not the self that God made good. The self we deny is the self that hides from God. Where have you been hiding from God? Where have you been hiding from the person God created you to be? Come to the quiet day on Saturday and give yourself a couple of hours to think about that question. Have you been hiding in the daily round of tasks and to-do's and other's expectations? Lent may be a time to lay a few things down for a while. Have you been hiding in the TV room while your spouse does the chores? While your spouse who is compelled by a sense of self denial to do the chores? Maybe Lent is a time for you to take on the discipline of holy housekeeping, holy hospitality. Have we been hiding behind our privilege in one of the richest nations in the world, using our status and wealth and power like fig leaves to cover our nakedness? Perhaps our Lenten discipline involves some self examination of how we have used our privilege to ignore and even oppress others.

Come on Thursday evening and watch a film with us called "Traces of the Trade" which examines the history of the slave trade in the 16 and 1700s and the participation by some faithful Episcopalians in that horrible, horrible practice. And then documents how faithful Episcopalians in the 21st century are coming to grips with the past and are moving forward in hope. Perhaps our Lenten discipline of dealing with the ways we hide behind our privilege is to walk in the Crop Walk next Sunday to alleviate hunger in the world. Maybe it's to participate in the Nets for Life campaign and purchase a net that will save a family from malaria.

Wherever we've been hiding from God, the hope of Lent is that God will find us. God will find us, and we can bold-facedly say, "I am not worthy, Lord" and then a few minutes come to the table and receive the body and blood of our Savior. That's hope. The hope of Lent is that we can and we should weep over our failings, and when we weep, God will wipe away our tears. The hope of Lent is that our fasts, our disciplines, our prayers will lead us out of our hiding places, and into the light of love and into lives filled with a hunger and a desire for God. And so I invite us, brothers and sisters, to a hopeful Lent so that our eyes may be opened, and we may see that we are naked. We may also see that God is not done with us yet. Amen.