

Lent 1A 2017, March 5, 2017, Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7, Matthew 4:1-11, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, Pa., Kurt S. Strause

For those interested in family genealogy a popular new development has emerged in the form of DNA testing. I've never done this myself, but I understand it's fairly easy. A small sample of saliva is taken from your mouth and sent off to a testing laboratory. In a few weeks the results are sent back to you. The report shows what percentage of your ancestors came from particular parts of the world. Some of the results may not be surprising telling you what you most likely already suspected. But sometimes the results contain some surprises. Who knew that you had a branch of your family coming from Siberia? Or that long lost branch finding their way from Outer Mongolia? Currently there are several companies offering these services, all for a fee, of course. I've heard that some folks have found it to be quite helpful, others more mildly amused than anything.

I like to think of the story of Adam and Eve we heard from the book of Genesis this morning as something like a DNA report on our ancestors. It's not that I believe that a DNA report from Ancestry.com is going to trace us back to Adam and Eve. Rather, I think this story gives us a report on our spiritual DNA. This is a story about origins, about beginnings. Who we are and where we came from. Not a physical place or a physical ancestry. But a spiritual, human condition. When we are reading this story we are reading a report of how our human ancestors got started on the road we are on. It's important to note that this story is meant to be universal. It describes a common human story, before there were any religions to divide us, any race or culture or tribe or language that prevents us from sharing our lives together. Adam and Eve are our ancestors in the sense that their story also shapes our experience of the world and our relationship with God. Their lives help us explain why things are the way they are.

So let's take a look at this story from Genesis and see what it tells us about ourselves. I believe the first thing I want to say is that we need to stop blaming the serpent for all the trouble. Here at the beginning we see that putting the blame on someone, or something else, is part of the trouble. We tend to blame the serpent, or Satan or the Devil as the later church identified him. Here the serpent isn't really evil. The voice of the serpent is a very reasonable voice. A voice we all hear in our own heads each and every day.

The serpent, I think, only makes clear to Adam and Eve what God already built into the Garden of Eden. Remember, it was God who placed a delightful looking tree in the midst of the Garden and then told Adam and Eve to stay away from it and not eat its fruit. I don't know about you, but the first thing that comes into my mind when someone tells me not to do something is, "Well, why can't I?" It wasn't the serpent who put the tree there. And it isn't the devil who presents us with choices to make in our lives. God made us as human beings. We are given freedom to choose. One path leads down a road of action which is pleasing to God. It's a path of faithful obedience and intimate relationship with God. The other path leads away from God, away from blessing and towards the difficult and sometimes painful consequences of bad decisions.

God gave Adam and Eve a choice. All the serpent did was point out the clarity of the choice to a pair of humans who seemed, if not naïve, then certainly innocent. And when presented with the choice in clear terms they chose wrongly. They chose independence from God. They chose their own way. They chose self-sufficiency, a go-it-alone path, rather than relationship with God.

Adam and Eve belong to our family because we bear more than just a passing resemblance to their actions. We believe in this matter that you and I are direct descendants of

Adam and Eve. Indeed, identical twins. For we share both the choice made by them and the results of that choice. We make our choices based on self-interest. We see others in the world as rivals and competitors, not as companions and friends. Our relationship with God is not an intimate, daily walking together. Rather, we fit God in, a few minutes here, a quick prayer there. We say we depend upon God, but we mostly rely on ourselves.

On this first Sunday in Lent we need to be reminded once again why Jesus takes that awful journey to the cross. It's not just that we and all other people have done a few bad things along the way. Rather, right from the very beginning we chose a path which takes us away from God. We had a choice. God gave it to us. It wasn't the serpent or the devil that made us do anything we didn't want to do already. But the one theme which runs throughout human history is our continual decisions to choose a path which leads to alienation, separation and death. As pious and religious as we might like to think we are, we choose ourselves over God any day of the week.

The gospel reading for today shows us once again what God does about our condition. God enters our story. God enters our world. Jesus, the perfect Son of God, begins to experience the temptations we face each day. Again, it's not the devil who is really offering these things. It's God who places these choices before himself. In a world where two thirds of the world goes to bed hungry at night God could certainly turn stones into bread and feed every single hungry child. Just a little flick of the divine pinky finger and everyone would have enough bread to eat. But that kind of world would take Jesus out of our story, out of our picture. For God to work our salvation from this mess Jesus must fully experience what we experience. Jesus must journey to that moment when he will experience all the rage and torment we human beings are capable of dishing out on each other. Every act of hoarding bread and keeping it out of the hands of the hungry, every act of genocide, every spiteful fight over child custody, every murder, every act of dishonesty and lie and knife in the back hangs with Jesus on the cross.

Temptation does not mean that piece of chocolate calling out to you in the middle of the night. Temptation is the freedom of choice God lays out in front of us. But in Jesus we see how God now provides us with a path to follow. This is a path of giving up oneself rather than holding on. By following Jesus to the cross, indeed by taking up the cross ourselves, in lives of relationship with others, in relationship with God, we hear that what began with our ancestors Adam and Eve isn't the end of the story. The story finds its climax in God who joins us and bears upon himself the failures of all our wrong choices, from the very beginning to the present moment.

We are then both strengthened and forgiven. In the weakness of the cross God pours out upon us the strength to face temptation. Not perfectly, for our weakness is still with us. Not completely, for our hearts still want to hold onto a selfish desire to remain in control. That's why the cross always forgives, for God took it upon himself to bear our failings and failures and selfish desires to remain in charge. Here we find perfect peace, loving forgiveness and the promise that we are becoming the human beings God intends us to be. Amen.