

March 1, 2020

*Sharing the Story—Lent 2020*

Shepherd's Grace Church

12 Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned—<sup>13</sup> sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. <sup>14</sup> Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

15 But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. <sup>16</sup> And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgement following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. <sup>17</sup> If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

18 Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. <sup>19</sup> For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Welcome to Lent! You know the season. You know the drill. Give up something. Take on something. Do something different for the next 6 weeks so you can get to Easter and feel good about yourself. So you think you have accomplished something. Welcome to Lent.

Is this you? Are you the cynical Sunday morning worshiper who sees this season as about yourself? Are you the one who imagines yourself actually accomplishes something. Are you the one who makes lists of the things you are going to do and then goes about crossing things off the list? I woke up...check. I made coffee...check. I got my shower...check. I prayed...check. I read my devotional...check. It feels good to make lists and Lent can be a good time to make lists and look at them and feel like you are accomplishing something as you cross off all the things that are on them.

If this is you, welcome to Lent. Lists are good and commitment is good and it does feel good to see that something is getting done in the course of your day. At least it does feel good for me because sometimes I get to the end of my day and I wonder if I actually accomplished anything I set out to do that day. It is nice to look back and realize that some of the things I set out to do actually got done.

If lists are not your thing, welcome to Lent! Lent is a great time for abandoning routine. It is a great time for thinking and meditating on the possibilities that exist in the world...a world dealing with difficulties of disease and discontent. Lent is a great time to look at the big picture of the world and imagine something different. Lent is a great time to say what if. What if we had a plan to deal with the corona virus? What if we had a plan to work together with other nations of the world on alternative food sources? What if we could gain meaningful conversation regarding human trafficking? What if we decided we were going to get serious about the issues of homelessness and hunger right here in our own community?

If you like to think about big picture things and imagine how the world might be different, Lent is the season for you. It poses questions of possibility. It offers opportunities to step away from the everyday and the humdrum of tedium and organized chaos. It gives us the chance to imagine our lives as meaningful mediums for accomplishing great things.

If you are not a list maker or a dream keeper, if you're somewhere in between or even far away from either of the two pictures I have painted, welcome to Lent. Lent is a season of new. Lent is a season of old. It invites tradition and tedium. It invites imagination and intimidating dedication. Lent is a season where what if can become why not. It is a season where who cares becomes let's go! Welcome to Lent and especially, welcome to Lent this year.

This year, we are inviting one another to share the story. This year we are inviting one another not just to share the story of Jesus and His journey to Jerusalem but we are inviting one another to share the story with Him. To be sure, there is only one star in our story but there is room for a large cast.

What if, this year, at least on Sunday mornings you come prepared to imagine yourself as a genuine part of the story. What if you imagine yourself walking in the shoes of disciples who walked with him or if you imagined yourself talking with disciples or apostles or saints who actually talked with him. What if you imagined yourself as an antagonist to his star-studded strategy to change the world.

This year, what if you imagined yourself not only sharing the story by telling the story but also you imagined yourself *Sharing the Story* by taking part. Engage in the story and enter into the discussion from your own perspective as a way of learning and growing toward the fullness of all this season can be. You don't have to give up your lists. In fact, they may be helpful. You don't have to give up your dreams. In fact they might be essential. You do have to commit!

This year, we are asking that you commit to yourself that you participate actively in listening and maybe even engaging in conversation about why this one man chose to enter into our story. Why was the fullness of time, as God expresses, the time when God commissioned Jesus as agent sent to our world to communicate a different approach to the way we were living our lives?

Why was this one man sent to offer an alternative to the Law which was given hundreds of years before his appearance. Were there deficiencies in the Law? Were there shortcomings in the ability of people to understand? How can we climb inside this story and understand what Paul was trying to communicate to the people two thousand years ago? How can we be part of that story then? How can we be part of that story now?

We know that sin entered the world through one man. Paul is obviously talking here about Adam, the first man, the first sinner. His reference is clearly scriptural. He is referring to the message from Genesis 3. Quickly go back in your memory banks to what you know about that story. Eve is in the garden. She is tempted to taste of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. She is tricked by Satan and succumbs to the temptation. She then offers the fruit to Adam. Adam eats and the two both realize that they are naked in front of one another and they are ashamed!

This shame is the first reference to guilt that occurs in the Hebrew Bible. It comes out of a knowledge; the knowledge of good and evil. It comes from a recognition that there are things, events in our lives that should be kept private.

Prior to eating of the tree, Adam and Eve had no knowledge that there was shame in the world, that there was wrong in the world and that our actions or choices between right and wrong had consequences. That is

because, prior to this act there were no wrong actions. Adam and Eve had always acted in obedience to God. They had done what was right in the sight of the Lord. In this moment, they realized that they had not done what was right. They had disobeyed and they were ashamed, not of their nakedness before one another but of their raw naked disobedience before God.

They hid not from each other, but from God for they disobeyed him!

As you have replayed this story in your mind, have you entered the story? Have you imagined the moments in your life where you knew you were disobeying God? Have you re-lived the events of those moments? How did you feel when you realized you had committed an act contrary to the will of God?

Before we think about that, first let's consider the statement Paul makes. "Sin enters through one person." Weren't there two people involved in the garden? Wasn't Eve as guilty as Adam? How is it that Paul assigns blame only to Adam and not to Eve?

To answer this question, we must allow ourselves to be influenced by the customs and traditions of the culture in which Paul was writing. In that culture and in that time, the world was dominated by male influence and male influence alone. Women had zero voice in decisions made in public and in private, after they had expressed their opinion it was still the man's vote on the matter that was final. The people of Rome and the Roman Church would have not understood Eve's responsibility in the actions of the garden. For this reason, Paul chooses to disregard them. He assigns blame only to the man.

I read several commentators this week in researching this part of the passage and remarkably, they all took Paul's position. It was the position of the people of the first century A.D. and they did not want to introduce a different argument into the interpretation. For our purposes, however, I believe we must add at least a footnote. The women of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the western world have become as involved in the decision making process as have men. For this reason, while sin came into the world through one, I invite you into the story as man or woman and I invite you to determine for yourself if you are the one.

Is there a time in your life whether you are male or female that you know you deliberately disobeyed God?

But instead of spending much time on this question I want to draw you to the larger question. We will not spend much time on the question of disobedience because as Paul says, "All have sinned and all have fallen short of the glory of God." (Rom. 3) Since all are sinners, there is no reason to argue the point. All means all and that means you and that means me!

The bigger question is how do we know that all have sinned? What are the criteria? Paul says that sin existed before the law. How then could we know that we had sinned if we had no guideline? How could we experience the shame to which Adam and Eve were exposed?

The answer lies in the nature of God's relationship with us. Before there is law, there is love. If you have been able to enter this story and realize the shame you might have felt at sometime for your disobedience to God, I hope you recognize that shame comes not from a legal interpretation of your action but rather because of your knowledge of God's love for you, for me...for all of us!

"Sin," Paul says, "existed before the law but apart from the law, there is no reckoning of sin. There is no way to know what is a sin unless sin is defined so we cannot make a formal charge of the sin. Did you kill? Did you steal? Did you covet? Apart from the law there is no way to know because the sin has no definition. There is, however love and in love we know when we have failed God and when we have failed one another.

We know when we have disappointed or even harmed without having a legal definition of the kind of harm we have caused. Before the law, there is love and in love there is the acknowledgment of hurt.

It is that hurt that leads us to examine our conscience and realize that we have been disobedient. Just as Adam and Eve convicted themselves without law, so we convict ourselves as we recognize that the actions we take sometimes injure those whom we care most deeply about and particularly God! We know!

Because of what we know by entering the story of Adam and Eve, we are now aware that death has entered the world. When Adam and Eve felt ashamed, they felt it because they had tasted of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. They felt it and they knew the truth. The truth was that they had introduced death into the world. The truth was that they learned that God is always faithful to God's promises.

In an ironic way, what they learned was a good thing. While learning about death and mortality was difficult, it was the promised consequence of their disobedience. It was what God said God was going to do. Therefore, they learned through this difficult lesson that God keeps God's promises. God does not keep his promises of punishment. God does not desire to punish. God instead keeps God's promise of consequence. If God keeps God's promises in difficult things, How much more will God keep God's promise in small things; things like providing for our needs or caring for our loved ones? Adam and Eve learned and taught that sin and evil are in the world as a result of the choices of people, but love and compassion are in the world because God is faithful!

The reality of the effect of Adam and Eve's sin did produce the consequence of death. Death exercised dominion over all people as Paul says from Adam to Moses. As we enter into the story of Moses, we can recognize that death no longer exercises dominion. Why? Because of the law. Moses is the giver of the law and if we enter into this story with him, we can enter into the reality of the purpose of the law.

The purpose of the law is to give hope. Prior to the law and Moses, there was no hope. There was only the knowledge of disobedience and from that, death. Death seemed to be final and the just result of the breaking of a promise with God. There was no possibility after death. It was and that is all that could be said.

In the book of Exodus, chapter three (which if I can make a shameful plug, is one of the stories we will study we will study during our Lenten Bible Study Wednesday evenings at 7 PM--) the Lord heard the cry of His people from Egypt. For four hundred years, the people of Israel had been subject to slavery and persecution and they cried out to the lord. Out of their hopelessness and despair, they cried out and God heard their cry. God had never forgotten them but was waiting on them to call out to Him.

If you are engaged in this story, perhaps you can relate to a place where you are alienated from God; feeling as if God has moved far away in your life and you are desperate for God's presence once again. Perhaps you can hear in the cry of God's chosen people an invitation to cry out again. Perhaps you can remember that you too are one of God's chosen people and that God will never leave or abandon you either. As you make your decision to participate in this story, let me remind you what happens next.

God hears the cry and calls upon Moses to go to Pharaoh to request the release of God's people. God uses Moses, but it is because of God's nature that God responds. God loves those who cry out to him and seek him. He wants them to come out to him and to respond to his Love. From God's desire, from God's love comes the law. The law lays down guidelines which encourage...no, more than that; which demand faithfulness. Through faithfulness there is hope. Hope never disappoints. (Romans 5)

The law gives hope. It re-establishes a relationship that moves beyond life and invites eternal life. It invites a knowledge that there is more to living than just dying! The prophet Isaiah discusses that possibility in his

prophecy in chapter 25. The hope of eternal life is lived out in the willingness of the people to be obedient and recognize that they will be raised up on the last day. They see this promise fulfilled in the Passover of Exodus 12-14 as they witness the death of Egypt and the life saving presence of the Blood of the Lamb of God.

Again, if you have entered into this story, perhaps you can imagine yourself being passed over even though you have been disobedient. Perhaps you can imagine that death no longer has dominion over you. Perhaps you can engage in life in a new and different way as you express thanks for what Paul calls the "Free Gift."

The free gift is different than the trespass, Paul says. The trespass or the sin of the first man brought death to many but the Grace of God and the free gift, the Grace of One Man, Jesus Christ bring justification and life. Early on in this message, I asked if you could know why this one man entered into the world in the fullness of time in order to offer this free gift.

As you have made yourself a part of this story today, perhaps you can begin to gauge for yourself the answer to this question. Paul is writing to the church in Rome. Rome is the apex, the very top of the world at this moment in history and is the site of Caesar, the despot, the tyrant who is exercising control over God's people.

Let me be clear, Caesar controls all the known world at this time. He exercises control over all people. All people are God's people and the people have cried out to the Lord against the treachery and persecution exercised by Caesar. Does this sound familiar?

Once again, the people cry out. If you are a part of this story, perhaps you will cry out with them as you recognize that we too live in a world where the haves exercise control and tyranny over those who have not! Perhaps you will recognize that we live in a world today where the sin of power and greed so permeate the environment that we almost take it for granted.

That is the world to which Paul writes; a world so long oppressed that the world could not see another option.

The law had for so long been usurped that it no longer resembled the message God gave to Moses. It no longer offered hope. It had been sold out by religious leaders and so convoluted that it did not resemble its original form. The law was twisted and turned into something that only supported the elite.

In the church at Rome, Paul speaks to these very realities as he says that that which once offered hope now offers only tyranny. His response is not to overthrow the prevalent empire of the day but to remind us that there is a different empire, an empire of freedom and life. Paul reminds us that there is an empire of light and life and it is the empire of the free gift given by the One Man who leaves this empire to come to earth because God had heard the cry of God's people.

Jesus says in John Chapter 19 that his kingdom is not of this world but it is the kingdom of truth. He is Truth and his gift is to take away our sin so that we can once again stand upright before the ultimate King, the author of all creation who has dominion over all. That dominion is not exercised in tyranny but in love.

The message of the One Man is a message that reminds us that the law was given as a gift of hope but it became so twisted and turned around that it no longer offers that hope. He, the One Man did not come to destroy the law but to restore it so that it could be more easily understood. He, the One Man came to share the knowledge that Adam and Eve received so long ago. The knowledge gained in the garden after they had eaten of the fruit of the tree. That knowledge is not the knowledge of shame, but of love.

What Adam and Eve learned in sin, Jesus now wants us all to know in Grace. In the Hebrew Bible it is stated as the Shema. From Deuteronomy 6 it says, "Hear O Israel (Here read hear O People of God) The Lord Your God is One! You shall love the Lord with all your Heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." God's grace

is the love poured out on the first sinners and on each one since and on each one to come. It is the Law of Love that offered Jesus the opportunity to take on the sins of the world, even the sins of those who refused to love Him so that those who chose to love Him might receive redemption and be once again worthy to stand in God's presence for eternity.

This is the promise made for all who choose to enter into the story. It is a promise that even though sin was brought into the world through one man, it has been overcome by One Man so that all people might be worthy of the gift of Grace expressed most clearly in the cross and the blood stained sin carried there by One for the fulfillment of the promise to all!

I hope you will choose to enter this story. It is the story we will tell this Lenten season. It is not a story of sin and sadness, but rather a story of Love that knows no bounds. If you enter, you will make sacrifice. You will take on additional work to express the Love of God that now lives in your heart. You will be ridiculed by a world of oppression and tyranny, but you will be called a Child of God! Welcome to Lent!