

First Sunday in Lent, March 1, 2020
“Original Grace” (Genesis 2; Matthew 4:1-11)

Original sin is a term I heard quite frequently during my seminary career. It is a term we Christians use to speak of the sin that started all sinfulness. That sin is recorded in our first lesson for today.

There was no sin when the first man and woman were created. They lived in a state of blessed innocence, having no first-hand knowledge of good and evil. The only command God gave them when he placed them in the Garden of Eden was, *Do not eat fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*. As long as they were obedient to this one command, they continued to live in that state of innocence.

But then the serpent came along and invented something new: temptation. *Just look at the beauty of that tree. See how plum and juicy its fruit is? Surely God won't kill you for eating some of it. God is good. Besides, the fruit will make you big and strong – just like God. Go ahead and eat it.*

And they ate. At that moment, the eyelids of innocence were drawn back. They saw first-hand what evil was like. They knew they had betrayed God and experienced the guilt of that betrayal. They felt the separation and alienation from God that sin causes.

As a result of that sin, Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden where they had walked and talked with God. They were banished to a place east of Eden – a God forsaken land – where they would live by the sweat of their brow. Although they were created in the image of God, that image was now tarnished or dimmed. Their bodies became subject to sickness, corruption and death. The garden with the tree of life was no longer accessible.

The doctrine of original sin tells us that we have inherited this corrupt condition. It tells us that we are born with a sinful nature and a disposition toward wickedness. Simply stated, we are sinful because it is our nature to commit sins. And that separation and alienation from God that Adam and Eve felt are the consequences of our sin, as well.

That's original sin, but the title of my message is *original grace*. Bet you're wondering where I'm headed.

Grace is a word we Lutherans hold very close to our hearts. Grace refers to any unmerited, unearned, undeserved gift from God. So where, you might ask, are we able to find grace in this story of sin and its resulting consequences? According to the idea of original grace, if the fall had not taken place, then we would never have known the joy of being saved. Some Bible students say that it was an act of grace for God to allow the fall so that we could experience his amazing grace through salvation.

Now, you and I might not go that far, but let's think about it for a moment. Can the origin of sin also be the origin of God's saving grace? Could God take original sin and fashion from it original grace? Of course, the answer is yes, for with God, all things are possible.

Some consider grace to be a New Testament concept. However, if we define grace as God's action toward humankind to restore the relationship broken by sin, we will find examples of God's grace woven throughout the fabric of the whole Bible - including the story of the first man and woman.

Consider how graciously God dealt with Adam and Eve. First of all, God responded to their sin by condemning the serpent, with the promise that the serpent would ultimately be defeated through the woman's seed. This points to Jesus, the definitive example of God's grace. God also cursed the ground they would now have to toil. But God did not curse them. By God's grace, humanity was untouched by God's curse.

Secondly, consider how he punished them. According to what God had told them, they were to die because of their disobedience. That's what they deserved. And because God is a just God, justice would be served by their deaths. But like a loving parent, the punishment was given with the most grace possible. God could have wiped Adam and Eve out of existence right then and there. He could have called for the earth to swallow them or fire to come down and consume them. And God would have had every right to do that for their betrayal of him with their disobedience. But instead of some instantaneous means of death, God chose to let them die of old age. God gave them the opportunity to live long enough to have children and long enough to mourn their sin. Another example of grace.

Finally, when God banished them from the garden, he acted in grace to clothe the couple who now walked before God in shameful nakedness. God sacrificed an animal, one of his own created beings. Pointing ahead to the Mosaic covenant, the sacrifice of the animal's blood was a covering for their sin, and the skins were a covering for their bodies. These clothes were a promise that God would do what was necessary to cover their shame and restore their fellowship with him.

Humankind has been sinful from the beginning. Even the simplest act of righteousness was beyond them. So God had to punish them, but his punishment was gracious. Adam and Eve had children and their children had children, and so on, until one of their descendants was Jesus, the Son of man and Son of God, who could do what Adam and Eve could not.

They couldn't resist the power of temptation and remain righteous. But Jesus could. In our gospel text for this morning we read the account of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness.

I don't think it was a coincidence that his first temptation was to produce food. Adam and Eve were surrounded by food, but they still gave into the temptation to eat the forbidden fruit. Jesus, after fasting for forty days, refused to give into the temptation to make bread from stones.

The other two temptations were also fulfillments of what Adam and Eve failed to do. The serpent told Adam and Eve that the forbidden fruit would make them great like God. Similarly, the devil offered Jesus an opportunity to grandstand by throwing himself from the pinnacle of the temple and to have the greatness of an earthly king. But once again, where humanity failed, Jesus prevailed.

Like Adam and Eve and Jesus, we all face temptations. We're tempted each and every day to choose a way that God would not have us go. Original sin reminds us that we humans tend to give into temptation. The mother and father of the human race did and so do we. It is a family trait. Like them, we try to be like God, knowing good and evil. And like them, we are ashamed when our eyes are opened to the things we have done out of pride, arrogance, and self-centeredness.

But original grace reminds us that God sent his Son to do what we could not do. We couldn't stay righteous, but Jesus did. Humanity sinned when it was tempted, but Jesus told the devil where to go. Humanity disobeyed God and shamed itself, but Jesus obeyed God and pleased his heavenly Father. He not only resisted temptation, but drove the tempter away. And he can do the same for us.

So, when we are tempted, let's trust not in our own strength or abilities because we've been sinful from our origins. Instead, let us trust in Jesus and his strength for he has walked that road before us. And let us remember that when we do yield to temptation, God, in his grace, offers us the righteousness of Jesus to replace the unrighteousness we possess. And let us trust that God offers us forgiveness and a way to come home to our heavenly Father when we have wandered away.

God was gracious in the beginning, has been gracious down through the ages, and continues to shower us with grace today, in spite of our proclivity for sin. Jesus is God's ultimate display of grace. Where humanity fails, Jesus prevails. That is our promise and our hope.