

And just like that – our Lenten journey has begun. I begin today with thoughts either directly from or encouraged by Eugene Gibson in his commentary on our reading from Romans chapter 5. Eugene says that “From the very beginning of the book – meaning Romans – Paul discusses foundational theology.” We are going to briefly look at this foundational theology from Paul followed by a look also at more practical theology. Eugene goes on to say that “As we scan through chapter 1, Paul asserts ‘For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation for everyone, Jew and Gentile.’ This, my friends, is a very big deal at that time because Israelites of old believed in two kinds of people, Jews - who had a birthright relationship with God – and Gentiles - everyone else who have no relationship with God unless they converted to Judaism. Paul is saying Jesus changed this longstanding dynamic which is **also** caught up in the concept prior to Jesus that only **certain** priests could enter the “Holy of Holies” in the Temple and be in the presence of God **yet** after Jesus we all, Jews and Gentiles, have **direct** access to God. By my way of thinking, God’s relationship with humans did not change but rather humans’ way of understanding their relationship with God changed.

So you might ask – why the change? Eugene Gibson once again says that “Paul contrasts sin and grace by placing them in the personhood of two of the most prominent figures in the Holy Scriptures.” In other words, Adam is the personification of sin and Jesus is the personification of grace. Have you heard of the theological concept of “original sin?” Well, this reading from Romans is one of the two main texts that fostered that concept, yet – **I** - struggle with the whole idea of original sin. We are created in God’s image which **could** mean we have freewill, the ability to make choices. So, are our sins or our disobedient times what separate us from God? Or is it our sin, our choice not to be in relationship with God what separates us from God? I believe all those big or small acts of sin, disobedience, are just symptoms of our sin which is simply a broken relationship with God. Jesus, God with us, came to show us how to restore our relationship with God. How? By focusing on others not ourselves. This focus draws us closer to each other and to God. As Matthew 25 says, we often find God in the least of those we encounter.

So, in the last few weeks, we have had gospel stories about Jesus’ baptism, the Sermon on the Mount, Transfiguration, and now the Wilderness. There are several things of importance in this gospel reading today. Audrey West, in her commentary on this reading immediately points out the first thing of importance. She says, “It is no accident that Jesus winds up in the wilderness after Jesus’ baptism. Jesus is not lost, and Jesus is not being punished for something Jesus has done wrong.” No, Jesus has been driven or led, depending on the gospel and translation used, into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit for a purpose – to be tempted or tested. Throughout the scriptures, the wilderness represents a place of preparation, a place of waiting for God’s next move, a place of **learning** to trust in God’s mercy. Could you be in your own wilderness right now? Do you recognize your current life circumstances as a wilderness experience? Are you being tempted or tested? Why? Are you really trusting God in all of your life experiences?

Audrey goes on to say, “For forty days and nights Jesus remains in the wilderness, without food, getting ready for what comes next.” This identifies the second thing of importance in this reading which is the use of forty. Forty appears often in the Bible, 158 times in 145 verses in both the Old Testament, 134 times, and the New Testament, 24 times. For instance, Noah and his family endured the rain on the ark for 40 days and nights, and Moses fasted on Mount Sinai for 40 days and nights as he inscribed the words of God’s covenant, Elijah fasted in the desert for 40 days and nights to receive a new commission, and of course, the Israelites wandered for 40 years in the wilderness. Now this latter actually occurred before all of these others except for Noah. And now we have Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days and nights which **we** honor with 40 days and nights of Lent. Have you ever wondered about the significance of the number 40? I have. The best or most logical answer I have found to date is that in Near Eastern traditions, the number 40 was associated with a generation, or completion, or the fulfillment of a cycle. In other words, 40 is essentially cyclical or generational.

The third and final important thing I want to point out from this reading is why we have it. To answer that question we must consider where it appears and **that is after** Jesus’ baptism and transfiguration experiences. What important happened in each of those stories? Why - God affirmed and confirmed Jesus’ **identity**. Warren Carter in his commentary on this reading first points out that if Jesus accepted or acquiesced to the temptations and tests, Jesus would lose the identity of an agent of God. Warren goes on to say the “devil misrepresents the nature of Jesus’ identity. The three tests involve only displays of power. Jesus will, of course, utilize miraculous power but Jesus will also suffer and die.” So Jesus’ identity is not solely about or vested in power.

And so, we arrive at our first reading from Genesis. I have often heard this reading described as the *“fall of man.”* Have you heard that? I guess that would tie to the idea of *“original sin.”* Right? But what if that is not right? What if it is a story of boundaries and disobedience? Valerie Bridgeman in her commentary on this first reading tells a story about her 2-year-old son. The story goes this way. “When my younger son was two, I put the cookie jar up on the refrigerator, out of his reach, and explained to him that he could have a cookie after dinner. When I left the room to vacuum, he dragged a chair to the counter, climbed up on the counter, and pulled the cookie jar between his chubby legs. I came back into the kitchen just as he was reaching into the jar for the cookie I had delayed but not forbidden. I promised I would pop his hand if he got a cookie. He looked me in my eyes and never left my gaze as he got a cookie and ate it. He determined in his 2-year-old mind that the cookie was **worth** a pop on the hand.” She goes on to ask, was that sin? Her answer was, “No, but it was disobedience and pushing the boundary.” I often say children and teenagers, **oh and us by the way**, want boundaries fully understanding that they, we intend to push and test them. I like to say that is our nature, it is in our DNA. The real struggle for us is to define or recognize the difference between disobedience and sin. Often our churches, unintentionally or intentionally, blur that line.

Hear then the good news:

Lent is not about what we give up for Lent, but rather what we do instead.

God loves you.

It is convenient for us to call someone – less. Less deserving, less human, less legal.

Why? Because we have been trained to believe that someone who is less is in a way, not someone.

That is not and never was the way of God or Jesus.

Gail Miller in her God Pause devotional on our gospel reading on Thursday said, “Jesus steps into the center of our brokenness and becomes the one who overturns the power of sin, replacing death with abundant life.”

She also said in the same commentary, “Where sin condemns and destroys, Jesus restores and gives life in overflowing abundance. In Jesus, death is defeated, and a new kingdom reality begins even now.”

Do you believe in God?

Do you believe in Jesus?

Do you trust in their promises and in them?

Grace and peace to you my friends, this week – in whatever wilderness you are in, trust God.

**Amen**