

“THE LAMB WITHOUT BLEMISH”

a sermon on Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7, Romans 5:12-19, and Matthew 4:1-11

Lent 1 – March 5, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwille

Sumner, Mississippi

“Therefore,” wrote John Calvin, “all of us, who have descended from impure seed, are born infected with the contagion of sin. In fact, before we saw the light of this life we were soiled and spotted in God’s sight . . . Adam, by sinning, not only took upon himself misfortune and ruin but also plunged our nature into like destruction.”

It is one of the classic statements of a doctrine long held by some branches of the Christian Church (including our Presbyterian/Reformed tradition). The doctrine is called “original sin.” Like “predestination” and a few others, “original sin” has nearly always been a *controversial* doctrine, and never *completely* accepted even within the ranks of orthodoxy, let alone outside of those ranks. On the other hand, the doctrine remains a significant part of the theological system of belief we Presbyterians claim to profess.

So then as we commence our “trek” through the Old Testament covenants and drama in our Lenten journey and contemplate how Jesus’ death on the cross somehow “sets things right” and creates “newness of life,” we begin at the beginning, with the story of Adam and Eve.

And I think that in the first place, we should be “up front” with what we *don’t like* about this story, and what I suspect many of us *don’t accept* about the doctrine of original sin. In the first place, our modern scientific understanding of the origin of life questions the very *existence* of two “first human beings” fashioned directly from God out of clay in our currently “evolved” form. But our most obvious objection to the *doctrine* is its insistence that “sin” is “inherited” – that it is “passed along” from those first humans . . . or to be even more “politically incorrect” . . . just from *Adam*, as Paul writes, to each successive generation. We are literally *born* into sin, the doctrine insists. And so we have no *personal control* over that fact – over our “state.”

So in the first place, I want to attempt to “reframe” original sin this morning, in hopes of rescuing the doctrine from complete annihilation, as well as helping us understand why Jesus did what he did, and what difference it makes.

While it is certainly true that Calvin and his contemporaries viewed Adam and Eve as “real people,” and literally as the world’s first two human beings, what we need to understand is that the *value* of the Adam and Eve story isn’t that it is the story of the first two individuals who ever existed, but rather that it is the “human story” – that it defines and describes who *we all are* with respect to God’s authority over and presence in our lives, because Adam and Eve aren’t just two people, they are *the* two “archetypal” people. In short, *we* are Adam and Eve!

So although in former days it may have been thought that our nature had to be somehow “transmitted” to unborn children to be passed down from generation to generation, in our day I think we can simply say (and understand) that we are all “in sin” because we are *all* Adam and Eve, and therefore *their* sin is *our* sin.

And to better understand what it *means* to profess such a thing, note the difference between *sin*, and *sins*. *Sins* are wrong acts we have committed (or right acts we have failed to commit) which in Biblical history eventually became violations of the people’s *covenant* with God, and the breaking of God’s commandments – because eventually they *promised* to live a certain way, and to worship only the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who brought them out of Egypt, and into the land of promise, and formed them as a people.

Sin, on the other hand, refers only to a *state of being*. And it simply describes how we come into the world *existing*. And that “state” is what the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis works to define for us. What we discover there is first of all that our “state” (meaning, in the story, where Adam and Eve *ended up*, as opposed to where they *began*) is the state of *knowledge of good and evil*. We might prefer that it were not so. But Adam and Eve demonstrate that given the choice, it is our human *nature* to choose knowledge. We are “inquiring minds” that “want to know.” That is just who we are.

We were not *created* to be that way, according to the Genesis story. It is more “blissful” not to know. And no explanation is ever given for *why* we were created not to know. But the *reality* is that we now *do* have that knowledge, and consequently, we also now have the *responsibility* for living with the knowledge we have gained. Because we can tell “right” from “wrong,” we are morally obligated to do what is good and right.

Second, our state is the state of *imperfect relationship with God*. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, our relationship with God the Father is certainly *improved*. The “Way” is defined, and is “open” to us. But our relationship is still not *perfect*, and it never will be, in this life. That is a *given* of our existence. It is our *state of being*. We weren’t *created* to have an imperfect relationship with

God. We were created, according to the story, to live a blissful existence in God's full presence. But we had to *leave* the garden, and therefore God's "nearer presence" as well. That's just how it is. The Christian life, therefore, is a constant struggle for greater fellowship with God.

Third, and this one is particularly telling in our time, our state is the state of being first of all and primarily concerned about *ourselves*, rather than others. In the garden, at first, that was not the case. But in the "real world" where we live our lives, each of us *begins* life totally consumed with our own personal well-being, and has to *learn* to care and be concerned about others. For all his or her cuteness and other compelling qualities, a newborn baby is *totally* "self-centered" – doesn't care that mom and dad need sleep, but only that she gets fed, or changed, or paid some attention. That is the reality of our existence, and although we learn to overcome some of its draws on us, we never do so completely or perfectly in this life – because if we did, we wouldn't *survive* for long.

Which then becomes the "impossible challenge," you might say, of the demands of the old covenant. In order to fulfill it *perfectly* – to live completely "without sin," would mean to live totally and completely concerned with *others*, instead of *ourselves*. And that would lead – in this life – to our demise.

Hence the need for a *new* covenant, which as the Apostle Paul so beautifully described it, is a covenant in "the abundance of [God's] grace and the free gift of righteousness."

In other words, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God, in and through Jesus, fulfilled the impossible demands of righteousness for us humans (who know good from evil, and yet in this life remain "tied" to our humanity for the sake of our survival), and *gives* us the new state of being "justified," even though we do not deserve it by our own merit.

And that is why the circumstances of Jesus' life and death are so important in the unfolding "drama of salvation;" because he had to do what none of us can do. He had to *be* human, and yet completely "transcend" his human nature – his participation in human sin – by becoming completely, one hundred percent, self-giving, which for him, as it would for any of us could we accomplish it (which we cannot), led to his earthly demise.

Just as a lamb in order to be offered in sacrifice on the altar in the temple had to be *physically* "unblemished;" that is, without any physical abnormalities or injuries, so Jesus had to be a "lamb without blemish" *spiritually*, even able as in our Gospel lesson for the morning, to withstand the temptations of the devil himself, a feat no other human being has ever or will ever be able, in this life, to

accomplish. And in becoming that “lamb without blemish,” properly sacrificed for the sins of the world, God created a path for all humanity to be “viewed” as righteous by grace, rather than by our own works, to be righteous *in him*, rather than in ourselves.

The season of Lent is upon us. Lent is a time to be “self-reflective,” to consider our shortcomings, our weaknesses, and our *limitations*. We begin the season on “Ash Wednesday” with the most obvious limitation – that as human creatures “we are dust, and to dust we shall return.”

But it’s *more* than that. During the brief time that we are “more than just dust,” we remain *bound* to our feeble earthly frames, and are never able to *fully* do the good that we know is right.

I bid you to take time in this season to actually *do* that reflection, because it is only when we come to terms with what we *cannot* do ourselves, that we discover what God *can* do, and *has done* for all of us, in Jesus Christ – the one who was born, as we all are, a totally self-consumed – albeit *beautiful* – little child, but who eventually did what *none* of us can do, so that we can live, by grace, in simple *gratitude* for God’s gift of grace.

To God be the glory.