

It is the first Sunday in Lent, our most penitential liturgical season. Penitence of course being the action of feeling or showing sorrow and regret for having done wrong. And, my friends, our texts are jumping in with both feet. Sin, sin, SIN!

What is your relationship with sin? Not actual sins or the act of sinning, hopefully all of us here are solidly, to the best of our ability, anti-sin. No, what I mean is: what is your experience with the Church talking about sin?

For many of us, the relationship is negative. The Church's approach to sin has left people feeling ashamed, defeated, even traumatized. An overarching theology that we are inherently sinful and that God loves us, *in spite of* who we are, not *because of* who we are.

I announced at the Annual Meeting that this Lent we would be following a series entitled *Seeking: Honest Questions for Deeper Faith*. You'll see this focus woven into all parts of our congregational life together, including a deepening question aligned to the texts for each Sunday in Lent. Sometimes the preacher will focus on this question. Sometimes not. But it is there for you to ask and engage in the week ahead.

Today, our seeking question is: Who will you listen to?

It's a powerful way to think about our texts, isn't it? Instead of the connection being sin, with Adam and Eve pitted against Jesus – the bad and the good; the problem and the answer; the cause and the cure – we see that they all experience times in their lives where they must make a choice. Where they must ask themselves, "Who will I listen to?"

Adam and Eve made the wrong choice. They listened to the serpent. They caused sin. That's what most of us have been taught, right?

Though some biblical scholars offer another interpretation. As one commentator puts it,

“In the ancient world, snakes were a symbol of transformation. Their venom held the possibility of both poison and medicine. Our human story begins in the crux of this same paradox of possibility, as the first humans embark into the fertile field God had prepared for them. “God knows that when you eat it, your eyes will be opened,” the serpent says. And while the serpent didn’t lie—indeed, their eyes did open—as it often goes with crafty tricksters, that isn’t the whole story. Because while the humans wouldn’t physically die as they imagined, God also told the truth. A death would happen. It was the death of their innocence.

Before we can embark on a life of wisdom - one that requires us to choose, over and over again, between using our words and actions for good or harm, we must allow our naive innocence to die. This call to grow up and leave our Divine Parent’s house comes for all of us...It is painful, and yet it is necessary.”¹

In this interpretation, Adam and Eve aren’t an origin story to explain sin as much as they are an allegory for what it means to live as humans in this world. What it means to seek, to find ourselves constantly at the paradox of possibility, to lay bare our deepest doubts and dreams to God.

Did God want to spare Adam and Eve from the pain of knowing good and evil? Sure. What loving parent does not? And yet every parent knows at some point their child must question and explore, test and challenge, in order to be a full person. And in order to participate in a full relationship. When they do, the relationship changes. All relationships change, again and again. Because the people in them do. Any relationship is an ongoing process of learning and adapting.

What we don’t often talk about is, Who does God listen to in this story? God listens to God’s children. Adam and Eve were not expelled from Eden because they broke the cardinal rule and now God’s hands are tied. Beware of any theology where God excludes or harms people because God has no other choice.

¹ Rev. Danielle Shroyer. Sanctified Art. Seeking Curriculum.

God recognizes Adam and Eve are not who they were before. That their relationship cannot continue as it was. God listens and God adjusts, because more than anything God wants to be with us, in the real, actual lives we are living.

And, having taken some first shaky steps on the path to wisdom, Adam and Eve also make a choice. Beloveds, listen to the voice that reminds us, Adam and Eve choose to continue their relationship with God, too. It is no longer the default, but an active decision. They know they're naked. They know they'll die. And they choose God. *Why? Why?* If you are here, you likely have an answer from your own life. Even if it's not an answer you've got fully sorted or even fully believe. It's a testimony question. It's a journey answer. The voice that asks and answers that question lives inside each of us. And I am much more interested in what our church and world would look like, if we listened to that voice.

What if we heard this story on the First Sunday in Lent, not to explain or agonize over our inherent sinfulness, but to remind us that true living requires us to show up, to mess up, to show up again, and to build relationships through mutual and ongoing trust. To remember that is what it means to be human and to remember God is totally down for it.

If you are hearing that I don't think it's important to talk about sin, that is not at all what I am saying. But the dominant way the Church has talked about sin has paralyzed those who are afraid of being sinful and empowered those who are not. And that does nothing to transform either group.

A long time later, in the liminal space that is the wilderness, Jesus finds himself also at a time of seeking. The tempter comes with challenge after challenge, and Jesus, like Adam and Eve, must make a choice.

As Rev. Danielle Shroyer writes, "And as [Jesus] does so, he teaches us what we all need to know as we fumble toward wisdom east of Eden. When he refuses to turn bread into stone, it's because he knows his gifts and abilities are in service to something far greater than [his] hunger. When he refuses to test God, it's because

he already trusts God. And when he refuses the kind of loyalty that leads to worldly authority, it's because he knows power is meant for connection and not domination."²

Before we listen to that voice that exalts Jesus at the expense of Eve and Adam, consider where Jesus is on his own path to wisdom. In particular, how Jesus has lived his life in a community. Has lived a life full of relationships.

Again, to quote Shroyer, "Jesus knows all of this because he has been listening. Day after day, he dwells with his Divine Parent. He embodies the teachings he has received in the Temple, on his mother's lap, in his father's shop. Jesus shows us what it looks like to walk in wisdom, to become adept at parsing out the many voices that call for our allegiance."³

Jesus is an example, not of unquestioned loyalty, but of full humanity. He does not cancel out Adam and Eve, he is the fulfillment of their journey. This is God's dream for us, to live a life of seeking, where we do face difficult choices, and through our relationships, with God and one another, we are able to listen to the voices that bring us life – not perfect, easy lives but whole ones.

Doesn't that just sound a whole lot more like who Christ is, than the voice that says that God loves us, *in spite of* who we are?

"If we are to be like Jesus, we also must begin by first listening to the voice of God at our center. This voice tells us, above all and after it all, we are God's Beloved. When we know this, we filter out so much of the silt and grit that traps us. We release ourselves into the arms of love. We make space for the work of transformation to be born in us."⁴

Lent could be our invitation to do just that. Who will you listen to? Amen.

² Rev. Danielle Shroyer. Sanctified Art. Seeking Curriculum.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.