

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, February 26, 2023

The First Sunday in Lent

Litany & Solemn Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*

on

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19

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The choices we make influence the stories that we will tell.

Yesterday, I was sent an extraordinary copy of a letter, typed on an old typewriter from the 1970s. It was a letter that was sent from one of the most important world leaders at the time, but it was written to someone whom he had not yet met, and whom he knew might never meet, and who might not even be able to read it. The original is not even on this planet anymore because it was sent into space on the twin Voyager 1 and Voyager 2 spacecraft, attached to a gold-plated disc containing a recording of sounds of the earth, greetings in 55 languages, examples of music, and math, and science, launched in 1977. Voyager 1 and 2 have now passed out of our solar system and are the first spacecraft to enter deep into space. As the NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory website states, *“the historic entry into interstellar space, the region between stars, filled with material ejected by the death of nearby stars millions of years ago.”*

Material ejected by the death of stars: A few days ago, we celebrated Ash Wednesday. Christians often focus on the dirt aspect of dust, and that it is so often seen as a sign of sin, guilt, and unworthiness when, in actual fact it could also be seen as a sign of our creation, and our connectivity with the universe - the same material ejected into space by stars, that is in our very bones. As we begin our Lenten journey, we will hear again the stories of our ancestors in the faith, and think about our own stories. We will think about the choices that they, and us, have made and the way that those choices have influenced those same stories.

In our first reading today, from Genesis, we heard the story of the fall from grace – the result of the choices that were made by Adam and Eve, which resulted in God reminding Adam that he was from the earth and would return to it; *‘dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return.’*

The story of the fall is a story of giving in to temptation and its consequences; but, looking at it from God’s point of view, it is also a reminder that this is not the way that things are meant to be. The fall from grace was exactly that – a fall from grace caused by humankind’s willingness to reject the love of God the Creator and, rather, to abuse the stewardship entrusted to us by God the Father. Grace is a gift from God, but also something that we can refuse or deny. The fall did not destroy the presence of grace in our world; far from it, as we read in the Hebrew Scriptures, God continued to flood the world with his presence and his grace and, yet, time and time again, we rejected his

presence and his grace. Then, as St. Paul says, *“When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.”* (Galatians 4:4)

When the fullness of time had come...which, for Christians, also takes them back to the very *beginning* of creation and how things are meant to be:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John 1:1-5)

When all seemed lost, God flooded the world with his grace and presence. Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but the knowledge they gained was for their own ends – inherently of a selfish motive - and, instead of making them like gods as the serpent promised, it simply destroyed the beautiful relationship that they had with God their loving Creator, and the world that he had given them to steward. Banished from the Garden so that they could no longer have access to the Tree of Life, it was Jesus, the Second Adam, the perfect image of the Father’s glory, who turned the cross of shame into that Tree of Life and restored the balance to creation, offering grace, freely, for all humankind.

And what is this grace? The grace that Adam and Eve so recklessly abandoned and yet Mary of Nazareth embraced? As parishioner, Libby Clark used to say with a beaming smile, “Grace is God’s riches at Christ’s expense.”

What a wonderful mnemonic: Grace is **G**od’s **R**iches **A**t **C**hrist’s **E**xpense.

St. Paul says, *“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.”*

A reversal of the fall from grace! So much so that in the Easter proclamation or *Exultet*, we can actually sing about the fall in the most extraordinary way: *“O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam, which gained for us so great a Redeemer! Most blessed of all nights chosen by God to see Christ rising from the dead! Of this night scripture says: “The night will be as clear as day: it will become my light, my joy.”*

From death to life; from condemnation to redemption; from sorrow to joy!

The choices that we make, influence the stories that we will tell.

My friends, this is what Lent is about. Jesus has walked the way that we will walk. He was tempted in every way that we are, but did not sin. That is why this Lenten season is a *joyful* season, for it affords us the opportunity to restore what was broken; to heal what is wounded; and to look forward to the glory that will be ours.

Somewhere, millions of miles away, a small spacecraft is hurtling through the cold of space, past the debris of dead stars, and into the darkness. It carries a letter which is both ridiculous and at the same time amazing. As we reflect on the choices that have been made all over the world since that spacecraft was launched, we might easily think that the letter is nothing more than science fiction.

And, yet, it is a message of hope and I find it remarkable that, in spite of the levels of mistrust, violence, and inequality in our world, this fragment of hopefulness is out there, somewhere:

I know some of you want to know what the message says, so here it is:

“This is a present from a small distant world, a token of our sounds, our science, our images, our music, our thoughts and our feelings. We are attempting to survive our time so we may live into yours. We hope someday, having solved the problems we face, to join a community of galactic civilizations. This record represents our hope and our determination, and our good will in a vast and awesome universe.

*Jimmy Carter
President of the United States of America*

*The White House
June 16, 1977”*

The choices we make influence the stories that we will tell.

From our Epistle today: *“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. 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.”*