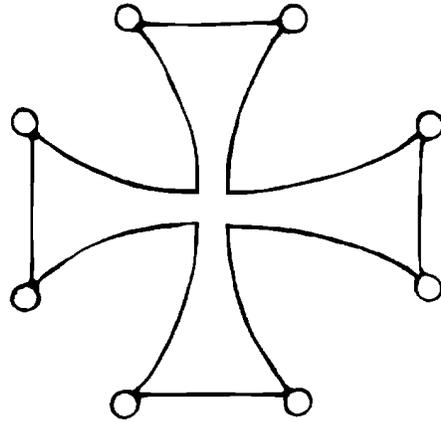


**THE REV. STEPHANIE  
E. PARKER  
SERMON**

**March 13, 2011**



---

Genesis 2: 15-17; 3:1-7 1 Lent 2011  
The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. And contrary to popular belief, Lent is not the time of “bad news” that we have to suffer through before we reach the “good news” of Easter. Lent is actually a time of great grace. And yes, as the people of Christ, we are invited to reflect on our mortality and sin. We are asked to reflect on the fact that physical life is in fact finite and that we spend an awful lot of that precious time separating ourselves from God---the very source of life itself. And when we separate ourselves from God we become increasingly separated from one another.

And we all know that this type of reflection is not always a lot of fun for us. But today let’s reclaim the joy of this holy time and remember that we are invited to reflect on these things in light of the creative and re-creative power of God<sup>1</sup>---the very power and grace by which we are all saved. Just think about the scripture that we heard this morning. We begin the season of Lent by hearing of God’s saving acts through history.

The Psalmist rejoices in God’s goodness and mercy as he enjoys the incredible lightness of being after confessing his sins to God. In Genesis we hear how the original parents of humankind were unable to resist the seductions of the crafty serpent. But place that side by side with Jesus’ victory over his own confrontation with immense temptation and we begin to understand what Paul was saying when he calls Christ the “new Adam.”

In Christ, God makes it possible for all of us to be a people who need not be cast out of the joyous places in life by shame and failure. We are reminded that we are the people that God has lovingly created and that we are the people whom God is always calling back into the fullness of life; life that we are given so that we might celebrate and enact God’s purposes in the world.

---

<sup>1</sup>Texts For Preaching, Year A, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1995.

Lent does come to us as a season of deep thoughtfulness about those places where our lives are the most fractured and broken. It does in fact ask us to look at the barriers we place between ourselves and God and to tear them down. We are asked to go without fear into those places where we don't want to look.

You and I both know where and what those places are in our lives. These are things about ourselves that we try to hide not only from one another, but from ourselves as well. We stand like those first humans in the garden attempting to hide themselves from God after they have eaten the forbidden fruit. What an interesting notion--- thinking we can hide our hearts and minds from God—God the merciful one who knows our failures and pain long before we ourselves can even approach it. This is the dark power of shame—it calls us away from the very one who loves us most.

So Lent is actually a glorious time in which we are reminded that what God wants most of all is not our perfection, but our desire to return to God whole and unburdened---we are called into remembering that we are free to lay our sins aside like the worn out overstuffed baggage that they are. I think that we can get so used to hauling so much horrible junk around inside of us that after a while it just feels like that's how we're supposed to be.

[Anger or resentment is like this---people can get so used to being angry and resentful that it just feels natural. Anger can have us looking at the people in our lives with a jaded eye. We look at the people we come in contact with in our daily lives or at home, work or in the church---we look at them through accusing eyes and just dare them to fail us. And soon, because we usually find just what we're looking for---we are not disappointed! The world or those we sought to connect with have let us down again and our anger grows. Does anybody recognize this cycle?

And most of the time people can't even remember how they first became so wounded that anger was the only shield they could offer against feeling vulnerable in the world. Anger...what heavy and burdensome baggage. If you find yourself shaking your fist against those who populate your life more than you embrace them—you may be being invited to lay that anger down in these merciful days of Lent.]

What else? How about fear? Fear is just anger's younger brother! How many of us walk around utterly fearful of life---so fearful in fact that we can't even remember what it is like to risk ourselves in life anymore. We don't risk love---love just puts us in jeopardy of being hurt again. We don't risk forgiveness. Forgiveness just gives people who have hurt us before the chance to hurt us again. We don't even risk second chances or a new start in life. We just dig a deep trench and hunker down. Have you ever noticed that a trench looks just like the beginning of a good grave?

Fear...what a crippling load to haul through life. If fear is one of your closest companions, these next few weeks may be your best hope for liberation. Stand before

God in all of God's mercy and say "God, I do not want to be fearful anymore. Help me to learn how to lay this baggage down. Help me to find the places and the people who will call me into new life and new hope." "Give me the courage to live out my life sharing in the fullness of Christ's love."

"Be not afraid." Jesus tells us this again and again because you see; the promise of God's salvation is that none of us have to settle for living lives weighed down under old sin or shame.

Are you here with me on this? Can you feel those tight places in your souls longing to uncoil and be free? And of course beyond anger and fear there are a whole host of barriers that we can erect between ourselves and God. And once these barriers are up *our greatest temptation* is just to keep them in place.

You all know your own places that are in need of healing. You know the behaviors and habits that bind and imprison you. I hope you will hear the invitation of this Lenten season to come unafraid and stand before God and open yourselves up to redemption and release. Open yourselves to the fullness of joy and wholeness.

Now today we have this marvelous story of Adam and Eve. Like many of our most profound scriptures, the power of humanity's first brush with temptation and their separation from God in the garden has been buried under the haze of familiarity. And worse—I'm afraid that its power has been lost to bad or thoughtless teaching from the Church---don't you just hate that? When it's the Church's teaching that that leads us astray!

But today let's throw off all of those horrible images from art of Angel's with swords of fire acting as God's holy bouncers---casting Adam and Eve out into the hard reality of life after the beauty of Eden. Let's try to suspend the thought that human toil and misery was God's punishment for humankind's first failure. Let's even take the risk of believing that far from being vengeful, God's heart was breaking as God witnessed the loss of humankind's innocence and gazed in horror as shame came to be one of our closet companions.

What a horrible moment for God when God's heart turns to embrace and celebrate with those whom he so lovingly created and gave life only to find that something dark and sinister had crept into their hearts and that they were afraid of their loving creator. The foundations of the earth must have trembled when humanity first hid themselves from God's all embracing love.

In those few indiscreet moments of giving in to temptation, Adam and Eve's innocence was shattered. When humankind first chose to place a barrier between them and God, a relationship that was once whole and pure became deformed and they fell into fear.

There is that word again...fear. God knew that now that their innocence was lost and that they lived in fear, the joys of Eden were lost to them as well. I'm not so sure that those famous curses that followed Adam and Eve's confession are punishment so much as God

simply and sadly detailing what the world feels like when we live out of fear and shame..... You see, what we forget is that God in fact made this crafty serpent that we have turned into the bad guy of the piece, but it was humankind that created fear and shame.

God's deepest intention is that we all know joy and know it completely. God calls us to return to the innocence of believing that the world is good and that we as God's beloved are God's very delight. I think God calls us to banish shame and fear. In so doing all of the darkness and pain we carry around can spill out into Christ's loving light and be transformed into what might just become the very best parts of us. This is the power of God.

We can do this healing, spiritual work at anytime of course, but since we are just beginning this season of Lent, let's take this glorious time—this season of mercy and restoration and let's just lay all of our stuff at God's feet. Let's just lay all of our garbage out on the table and see what God does with it! Once we do this I promise you we will be liberated and free. And once we are liberated and free who knows where this new life might lead us? Imagine this----It might just lead us straight back to our own innocence; an innocence in which we can love God and embrace life without fear or shame or anything that is keeping us from the joy of God.....now that's a Lenten journey worth taking! Amen!

**The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker  
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church  
Seattle, WA**