

“For the Healing of the Nations”

The 2009 General Assembly of the
Christian Church (*Disciples of Christ*)
Indianapolis, Indiana

“Return to Wholeness” - Genesis 3:1-9
Thursday Evening – July 30, 2009 – 8 pm

Glendale, California – a suburb of Los Angeles - is “*home*” for me. It’s where I grew up. Google “*Glendale Tourist Attractions*” and the “*Topix*” site issues an immediate apology. “*Sorry,*” it says, “*there are no listings for Tourist Attractions near Glendale, California.*” That’s unfortunate, and even unnecessary, for all of the other web pages that Google takes you to know of at least one tourist destination in my hometown, a cemetery - Forest Lawn.

In other parts of LA they sell you maps to the homes of the stars on the street corners. In Glendale you can get a map to the graves of the stars. Forest Lawn is the final resting place of more Hollywood stars than any other cemetery in the whole world. Clark Gable, Carole Lombard, Jimmy Stewart, Jean Harlow, Humphrey Bogart, Mary Pickford, Errol Flynn, and Spencer Tracy are all buried there.

When I was a kid growing up, whenever my family had out of town visitors, I always knew that it meant that there was a trip to the cemetery in my near future. But we didn’t go just to point out the graves of the famous. In 1987 during his official visit to Los Angeles, Forest Lawn was one of the stops that Pope John Paul II made, and you can be quite sure that it wasn’t to have his picture taken standing next to the crypt of the Three Stooges. No, the Pope paid a visit to the cemetery in my hometown to see the art, and one painting in particular.

Back in 1917 when Dr. Hubert Eaton took over the management of the Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale, he had a much bigger vision of what his cemetery could be than just a place to be buried when you died. Rather than being an “*unsightly stone yard*” filled with “*misshapen monuments,*” Dr. Eaton decided that he would fill his cemetery with great art, especially art “*depicting the dramatic moments in the life of Christ,*” and so he “*scoured Europe*” for paintings and statues that he could “*purchase or replicate*” for his new memorial park. And one of the pieces of art that he acquired was Jan Styka’s great masterpiece “*The Crucifixion.*” And it was this painting by a Polish artist that the Polish Pope came to my hometown to see.

The scene it portrays is a hill just outside the walls of Jerusalem on Good Friday afternoon, and the moment it captures is right before Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross. A shaft of light illuminates Christ’s upturned face, and kneeling beside Him is the man who has been digging the hole into which the foot of the cross will soon be dropped, holding a human bone that he has just dug up. This is a version of an ancient Christian tradition, the one that says that

Jesus Christ was crucified over the grave of Adam. So, where does the Bible say this? Well, it doesn't exactly; but the hint is there that has inspired the imagination of the faithful for centuries.

The Gospel of John tells us *"that in the place where Christ was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden there was a tomb"* (19:41), and that's just enough of a suggestion to get the allegorical juices of some of the faithful flowing. Add to this the fact that all four Gospels tell us that Jesus Christ was crucified at a place called *"Golgotha, which means 'The place of a Skull'"* (Matthew 27:33; Mark 15:22; Luke 23:33; John 19:17), and the tradition of *"Adam under Calvary"* begins to take shape.

Origen in his third century commentary on the Gospel of Matthew repeats the tradition that he had been told by a Christian of Jewish heritage that the remains of Adam, the first man, were buried under the cross of Christ. In Jerusalem today you can visit the Chapel of Adam that sits directly beneath the shrine of Calvary where it is said that Jesus Christ was crucified. And this tradition is written into virtually every Eastern Orthodox icon of the crucifixion by the placement of a little skull at the foot of the cross.

Inasmuch as icons are not art but *"theology in line and color,"* this symbolism is less about where Jesus Christ died than it is about why Jesus Christ died. This imaginative placement of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ over the location of Adam's grave is a symbolic way of telling us that what Jesus Christ was doing on the cross was bound up somehow with the Bible's story of Adam and Eve. As the Apostle Paul put it in I Corinthians 15 when summarizing the content of the Gospel that he believed and proclaimed, *"I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures"* (v. 3). And this wasn't just *"Paul's version"* of the Gospel (Hicks). That Jesus Christ died *"for our sins"* is one of the standard ways that the New Testament talks about what happened on Calvary's cross.

Every Sunday morning in every Disciples church of which I have been a part for the past 40 years, the moment has always come in the service when we have gathered as a community of faith at the Lord's Table to break bread, to bless a cup, and to remember. And in every one of those services of the Lord's Supper, through the reading of Scripture, the singing of hymns and the offering of prayers, a clear and consistent line has been drawn between the dot of Christ's death and the dot of our sin.

A big part of Jesus Christ's purpose here was *"to deal with sin"* (Hebrews 9:28). And this is what we are pointing to every week when we gather at the Lord's Table. We break the bread and bless the cup whenever we are together so that the thought of forgiveness - both our desperate need for it, and God's gracious provision of it - might never be very far from our minds or hearts. And this brings us to Genesis chapter 3.

Dan Snow is an artisan who builds walls, terraces and structures out of dry stone. His books are wonderful reads, not just for their descriptions of his amazing work, but for the spiritual wisdom that he has discovered through the years of eating his bread by the sweat of his brow with his hands in the ground. For instance, he begins one of his essays about building a series of retaining

walls at a farm in Vermont by explaining that, “*Construction begins with one stone... until there is one in place, there is nothing to inspire the selection of another... every choice is a response to the choices that have come before it.*” He’s talking about working with stones. As people of Biblical faith, we work with texts, and the very same truth applies.

Our story begins in a garden; this is the first stone, which when put in place, sets the direction for the placement of all the stones that follow. We come out of the gates as human beings in perfect shalom, in a time before time when everything and everyone fit together perfectly like the pieces of a puzzle that creates a beautiful picture. This was the “*original blessing*” that we still catch glimpses of and have experiences with, often enough in fact, to ache for its absence, and to know that it’s both our true origin and our final destiny. And this is our problem: we all know deep down in our hearts that we were made for life in that garden, but we just aren’t there any more.

The world in which we now live is broken, and the lives that we now lead are filled with such painful contradictions. Back in the 1970’s when I was just starting out in ministry and was working with youth groups, I often used a Bible resource that compared what we read about in the opening chapters of the book of Genesis to what happens on a placid pond when a rock gets thrown into the middle of it. From the point of its initial impact other disturbances radiate out in concentric circles. And this is the story that Genesis 3 tells. It’s about the rock that gets thrown into the pond.

I cut my theological teeth on the writings of the late Evangelical theologian Francis Schaeffer when I was in Christian College. He wrote about the results of the story that Genesis chapter 3 tells in terms of all the separations that followed in its wake (98-101). Francis Schaeffer said that the “*great separation*” between God and humanity, the origins of which were narrated in our Scripture lesson tonight, is what “*underlies*” all of the other separations that we experience in this life. And then to prove this point, Francis Schaeffer went story by story through the next few chapters of the book of Genesis to show how the story of our initial separation from God results in one separation after another –

- *Psychological - the divide we feel deep inside ourselves from our very own selves;*
- *Sociological - the divide we experience with others because of race, gender, economics, culture and nationality;*
- *Ecological – the divide we feel with nature that is no longer a garden but a challenge.*

The opening chapters of the book of Genesis have something of the feel of a roller coaster ride to me. First there’s the climbing of a steep incline; the reaching of the heights; a sensation of soaring. Then you crest the peak, and the bottom falls out. Suddenly you’re plunging wildly in the opposite direction. After the good and purposeful beginning of things in Genesis chapters 1 and 2, we’ve

got the havoc created by Genesis chapter 3. Every relationship gets damaged; every sphere of life gets touched. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it in his commentary on Genesis chapter 3, with the rebellion of Adam and Eve, God's good creation "*crashes blindly into infinite space like a meteor which has torn away from its nucleus*" (76). But God is not prepared to let it go.

Into the garden, in the cool of the evening, on the day of the fall, God strolls asking our spiritual parents "*Where are you?*" Note three things here: first of all, God comes; God always comes; that's just God's way. Second, God speaks, and what God says is not an accusation but an expression of grace; despite what's happened, God still wants a relationship. And third, humanity is given a choice; hiding in the trees, the way back to God is clearly mapped out; it is by the path of repentance, at least that's our part in the process of restoration for it "*provides the ground upon which God can act*" (Steadman).

Unfortunately, in the story of Genesis 3, this was the choice not made, the road not taken. Who can say how things might be different now had it been otherwise then? God's question to our spiritual parents, "*Where are you?*" was the opening for a confession, a clean and clear taking of responsibility. God didn't ask this question because God was somehow in need of some information; it wasn't as if God didn't know what had happened or where Adam and Eve had gotten off to. When God asked - "*Where are you?*" - it wasn't the geography of Eden that was being asked about, but rather the geography of the soul. As Rabbi Marc Gellman explains –

A ship cannot make its way through the seas without a compass, and we cannot make our way through life without being asked... "Where are you?" That question, and our answer, create the moral [and spiritual] agenda for... the work ahead... That question and our answer are meant to puncture the hidings, evasions, and self-deceptions that blind us both to the ways we have made progress, and also to the ways we have fallen short.

In the story that Genesis chapter 3 tells, Adam and Eve missed the moment. When they were asked, "*Where are you?*" they failed to give an honest account, preferring instead to hide, to evade, to excuse, and to blame, and that was the tipping point, the moment when the snowball began rolling downhill that triggered the avalanche of destruction with which we live today.

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition of Christianity the story we are thinking about here tonight gets told every year in the morning worship service on the very last Sunday before Lent begins. The liturgy of that day includes the haunting image of our spiritual parents sitting outside the locked and guarded gates of paradise lamenting all that's been lost to them.

Adam sat before Paradise and, lamenting his nakedness, he wept: 'Woe is me! By evil deceit was I persuaded and led astray, and now I am an exile from glory. Woe is me! In my simplicity I was stripped naked, and now I am in want. O Paradise, no more shall I take pleasure in thy joy; no more

shall I look upon the Lord my God and Maker, for I shall return to the earth whence I was taken. (Steenberg)

And then in the middle of this liturgy, a subtle shift begins to take place. Rather than just talking about Adam and Eve, “*him*” and “*her*,” “*then*” and “*there*,” it starts to talk about us, about “*you*” and “*me*,” about “*here*” and “*now*.” And suddenly we find ourselves standing next to Adam and Eve, joined to Adam and Eve.

This is no longer a third-person narrative... the narrative of sin, fall, repentance and judgment moves into the first person; ...no longer can I, standing outside and beyond the closed door ...feign innocence in the face of a story of 'long ago and far away'. ...whether we are ready for it or not, the sacred history of Adam and our own, personal histories as individuals are brought wholly together into one, communal story. (Steenberg)

The liturgical refrain of the Eastern Orthodox worship service on the Sunday morning before Lent begins is, “*Open to me the gates of repentance.*” This is a plea for us to have the courage to do what our spiritual parents couldn’t do, or wouldn’t do; to repent and to actually ask for forgiveness when asked “*Where are you?*” And then, just to make sure that there is no confusion about what is being asked of them, in the Vespers service for that Sunday evening before Lent begins in Eastern Orthodox churches, every minister and every member of that community lines up and begins a miraculous dance of guilt and grace. One by one, one after the other, everyone in the church approaches everyone else in the church, face to face and hand in hand to say, “*I’m sorry for all the ways that I have hurt you, and I am asking for your forgiveness.*”

So, how would this Assembly be different tomorrow morning if we did this here tonight? How would we as Christians and the churches we represent be different next week if the gates of repentance were truly opened here in Indianapolis this week? What difference could a church that was done hiding and evading have on the world? And what would be the impact of a denomination that suddenly stopped reflecting the horrid evil of all the unnecessary divisions that are just so common to the human condition, and began to actually live out of its promise to be a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world?

Our statement of identity as a church rightly takes us to the Lord’s Table where we say that we will “*welcome all... as God has welcomed us.*” And that begs the question: how is it that we are welcomed there?

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (Matthew 26:27-28)

On the night when He was betrayed our Lord used the bread and cup to draw tight the connection between His impending death on the cross and the problem of sin. Jesus went to Calvary with Eden on His heart. The journey that began in the garden with the question “*Where are you?*” wound up on a cross on a hill outside of Jerusalem where the work of forgiveness was accomplished and the word of forgiveness was spoken.

That skull under the cross... it turns out that it's mine. And because it is, it's by returning to God through Jesus Christ that I know that I can be forgiven, that I am empowered to be forgiving, and that I know, without the shadow of a doubt, that one day the nations will be healed.

Sources

- Bagatti, Bellarmino. “*Notes on the Iconography of Adam Under Calvary.*” Essays: Studium Biblicum Franciscanum – Jerusalem. 2007.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. Creation and Fall; Temptation: Two Biblical Studies. MacMillan. 1959.
- Forest Lawn Memorial Park. The Story of “The Crucifixion.” Forest Lawn Memorial-Park Association. 1954.
- Gellman , Marc.
- Hicks, John Mark. “*What Did God Do To Sin and Death Through Jesus Christ?*” johnmarkhicks@wordpress.com
- Schaeffer, Francis. Genesis in Space and Time. IVP. 1972.
- Snow, Dan.
- Steenburg
- Veit, Richard F. and Mark Nonestied. New Jersey Cemeteries and Tombstones. Rivergate Books. 2008.