

Ash Wednesday  
February 26, 2020  
St. Paul's UCC Church  
Rev. Mary Beth Mardis-LeCroy

**Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7**

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

**Romans 5:12-19**

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned—sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come. But the free gift is not like the trespass. 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. And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. Therefore 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.

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I haven't always had the best relationship with mirrors. Like so many of us, I was pretty awkward in my adolescence: bad acne, bad hair, bad glasses, bad clothes, bad

braces. (The braces may have been the worst. Hot pink). Basically I was a train wreck at age of 13, which meant that I did not love coming face to face with...my face. When I was 13, I learned to avoid the mirror as much as possible. My entire grooming ritual at age 13 usually consisted of nothing more than a quick splash of water on my face, and a quick check of my teeth (usually to make sure there was no food stuck in those pink braces of mine).

Now, it's been a long time since I was 13 – thanks be to God! –and I don't mind mirrors quite as much as I used to. But in a way, the habit has stuck with me. I still don't love taking a good, hard look at myself. I still don't love having to face up to my flaws, or admitting my weakness, or saying I'm sorry. Most days, I would rather not deal with the things that are wrong with me.

Maybe you're kind of like that, too.

But on this Ash Wednesday – on this first day of Lent – our Scripture readings invite us to do just that: to take a good, hard look in the mirror. Taken together, these two readings – one from Genesis and one from Romans – tell a lot of truth about us. They invite us to see ourselves as God sees us; they invite us to see things as they truly are.

So let me suggest two truths that we can hear in these texts; two things we're going to see when we look in the mirror. Number one: The World Is Broken because We Are Broken, and Number Two: But We Don't Have to Be Broken Anymore.

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Let's start with Number One: The World is Broken Because We Are Broken.

The book of Genesis takes us back to the beginning, back to the human race and to earth itself as God intended. In the beginning, we were set in a garden, we were given good work to do, given permission to enjoy the fruit of most of the trees and a prohibition against the fruit of one. But then what happens? We are seduced from our proper place in the universe. We decide to do the one thing that God forbids. And when this happens, when we step outside the boundaries God sets for us, Genesis tells us that "their eyes were opened." As soon as we step over that line, we start to see all sorts of things: our own vulnerability, our own shame, our own eventual deaths.

This is a story that tells the truth about us. Deep down inside, we know that we are broken, that life is a kind of exile, that we have fallen from our proper place in the universe. We are broken; and our brokenness has broken the world. Not fire, not floods, not tsunamis – we are the ones who have done it.

Truth Number One: The World Is Broken Because We Are Broken.

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But, of course, the story doesn't end there. It's just, after all, the beginning. The rest of the Bible unfolds the second truth we see in the mirror, Truth Number Two: We May Be Broken, but We Don't Have to Be Anymore.

The text from Paul's letter to the Romans, our second reading for this evening, is dense and confusing, but at least this much is clear: whatever has gone wrong with the human race has now been put right in Jesus Christ. As Paul sees it, once the human race comes off the rails, we are in pretty bad shape: sin and death enter the world hand-in-hand and we've been their victims ever since. But we don't have to be anymore. Because in Jesus Christ, God has come to fix human life from the inside out.

In Jesus Christ, God becomes one of us and lives our life and finally gets it right: Jesus resists every temptation, he loves other people the way we are supposed to. Jesus stays faithful to God to the bitter end. In Jesus Christ, we see human life the way God always intended it: back in balance, restored to its right relationship with God.

So we don't have to be victims anymore; we don't have to be broken anymore. In Jesus Christ, we are put back into right relationship with God, back into our proper place in the universe, back – in a very real sense – into that Garden our first parents left so long ago. Like them, we are given God's work to do; like them, we are blessed with many good things to enjoy; like them, God gives us boundaries in which we are to live, boundaries within which we can grow and flourish. And, like them, in that Garden, we don't have to be afraid of death. Not on this Ash Wednesday. Not ever.

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We begin the season of Lent today, and you know, Lent is a pretty good time to look in the mirror. In the 40 days leading up to Easter, the church encourages us to examine our lives, to reckon with our sin, to face up to the ways we fall short. And the glimpses of truth that we have seen this evening can guide our Lenten journey. Genesis reminds us the world is broken because we are broken, that our sin is deep and pervasive and real. But then along comes Paul, who assures us that it is not our job to fix or heal or save ourselves. None of that is up to us; Jesus has already taken care of it. We don't have to be the victims of bad genes, or lousy upbringings, or rotten circumstances or anything else. We can get better. Through Jesus Christ, we can become the people God has always intended for us to be.

This Lent, as we journey with Christ to the cross – and to all that lies beyond – may God open our eyes to see ourselves rightly: who we are now and, by the grace of God, who we can be, who we will be. May God give us the grace to linger with *this* mirror, and to be changed.

Thanks be to God.