

2.22.26 (Lent 1)

Herman Melville's great whaling novel *Moby Dick* tells the story of Captain Ahab's self-destructive pursuit of the white whale who shares its name with the novel. Herman Melville's great novel is a response to a movement of writers and intellectuals like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau who encouraged individuals and society to become more deeply connected with nature by living in the woods and paying attention to flowers in order to rediscover a sense of transcendence in life. *Moby Dick* shows a different side of nature: not just a cozy cabin in the woods, or meadows filled with flowers, but something dangerous, a massive beast that will drive you insane until it kills you.

The tension between those competing views of nature is a wonderful analogy for how the first three chapters of the Bible relate to one another. Chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis are two different creation poems that both conclude with statements of God's love for creation, and especially for human beings as the pinnacle of creation. Genesis chapter 3 describes how human beings, the pinnacle of God's good creation, go wrong, dragging all of creation down with them. And this morning we are given a rare opportunity to witness the transition between God's created order to a fallen order, from Genesis 2 to Genesis 3: From "the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed" to "the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked."

Do we live in the good world order described by Genesis 2, or the fallen one that we encounter in Genesis 3? That is an important question with serious consequences for how we approach our lives as Christians. Based on our answer to that question, we ask other important questions: What is natural? What is God's will for our lives? Is what we experience as natural part of God's will, or in conflict with God's will? What kind of world do we live in, and how should we live in it?

Is it the world God made, or the twisted byproduct of sin? By sin, I don't mean fun things that we aren't supposed to do, I mean a parasite that has invaded God's good creation by questioning the goodness of the creator, so that every gift from God has a shadow side. Do we live in Genesis 2 or 3? As a Priest, I see that confusion about these questions in particular fuel so much confusion about every hard question that we face in Christian life.

Do we as Christians instinctively react against everything new, because everything new must not be natural, since if it is not "natural" it must not be the will of God? Take modern medicine as one controversial example. There can be no doubt that modern medicine has its flaws, but how many Christians reject it because it is not natural, and therefore must not be God's will? Whatever else we want to say about medicine, what is "natural" is not the right place to start, because what is natural is not life as God intended it. Cancer is natural, strokes and heart attacks are natural, infertility and high mortality rates for women and infants in child birth are natural, widespread infectious disease (especially among children) is natural, mental illness is natural. But we must be very clear that those awful experiences are in no way reflections of the way that God designed and created life for us, or for creation, as if we have to choose between putting up and shutting up with horrible illnesses or rebel against God.

A tragic place where confusion about Genesis 2 and 3 makes productive understanding impossible is in conversations about gender and sexuality. The irony is that almost everyone with an opinion about those issues approaches them from the wrong perspective. On the one hand, we might say something like, my understanding of my gender or sexuality cannot be wrong because I was born like this, so God made me this way. Or we might say on the other hand: you could not have been born this way, God would not make you that way because it is wrong. Both perspectives begin from the wrong place: no one in human history is the person who God made

them to be. So whatever else we say about gender or sexuality, our starting point can never be how God did or did not make someone, since for the time being who God made us to be is hypothetical. No one is the person who God created them to be because of Genesis 3, and that is the whole point of this thing we are doing. Why would God have needed to enter into human life and die on a cross, if we were just who God made us to be already?

The Great Litany we just prayed together is a laundry list of natural experiences that reflect our Genesis 3 brokenness, not God's Genesis 2 will for us. If these natural experiences are just God's will, then why bother praying that God would intervene to stop what is natural? Because of Genesis 3, what is natural is so far out of alignment with God's will that God himself becomes a victim of his own creation's misalignment with his will. Do we think that we are living in Genesis 2, or in Genesis 3? And can we see why the way that we answer that question is important? Ever heard the phrase: play stupid games, win stupid prizes? Perhaps we could adapt that saying: "Play as if we live in Genesis 2, win a lot of confusion." Confusion about our own experiences, confusion about our own shortcomings, confusion about the purpose of Jesus, confusion about God's character, and confusion about how God is redeeming the world in Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, we need to interpret our lives, the Bible, God and Jesus through the lens of Genesis 3, or else nothing makes any sense at all. And that might sound a little bleak, because it is, at least at first, until we remember God's profound love for his creation, and especially for us human beings in Genesis 2. We live in a Genesis 3 world, but it is still the world that God loves. We are still the crowning achievement of God's creation, and God still loves us. God will not let us stay lost in Genesis 3, and that is why God comes to us in Jesus. Jesus is God's response to Genesis 3.

Did you notice that Jesus' temptations after 40 days in the wilderness parallel the failures of Israel in their forty years in the wilderness? And unlike Israel in the wilderness, Jesus does not give into the temptations for food, for power, and for control over God. Unlike our first parents, unlike the people of Israel, and unlike ourselves, Jesus does not give into temptation for bread, circus, and power, even when he is hungry, powerless, and alone. This is one of many ways that the gospel authors show us that Jesus came to be the perfect human being who we could never be ourselves because of Genesis 3. Or, as Paul refers to him: Jesus is the New Adam, and Adam is the Hebrew word for man. Jesus is a new and perfect humanity: "For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man (that one Adam) Jesus Christ abounded for many." Jesus is who and what we were created to be, he lives the life that we were supposed to live. As Bishop N.T. Wright says: "If you want to know what it means to be human, look at Jesus."

But here is a difficult truth: we hated human life as God intended it so passionately that we killed it. We saw the New Adam, and we could not help but kill him. We saw Genesis 2, and our Genesis 3 murdered it. Hundreds of years before Jesus' death, a follower of the Pagan Philosopher Socrates asked him how we would respond to the perfect human. Socrates' answer: "I suppose we would crucify him." How did Socrates know this? Can anyone in their right mind claim that we live in a Genesis 2 world on Good Friday? No way, Genesis 3 is all too real. But God did not allow the worst act of rebellion to be the final act in a human tragedy. God rose from death. And as the great Eastern Church Father St. John Chrysostom put it in an Easter sermon: "forgiveness rose from the grave."

This means that we live in a strange world: a loved, forgiven, and redeemed Genesis 3 world. An already but not yet world. A Genesis 3 world that experiences God's redemption in

Jesus, and is still waiting to experience God's love, forgiveness, and redemption in full. So Genesis 3 still provides us with the best explanation for life as we know it that is available. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why can't I do the things I want to do? Why is the world the way it is – a mixture of beauty and chaos – and why am I the way that I am – a mixture of beauty and chaos? Genesis 3 contains incredible explanatory power for these and other questions. It is not the final story in the drama of salvation, but it is a real story, and it is really part of our story, whether we like it or not.

I once needed to confess that I was struggling with something to a friend, and I was terrified to tell him. But when I did, his response was to say sarcastically: "wow Matt, no way!" That might not sound like a pastoral response, but it was exactly what I needed to hear. His sarcasm meant that he was not surprised by my confession. He takes Genesis 3 seriously, so he did not respond with shaming, judgment, or criticism, but with what I received as gracious sarcasm. You're not unique or especially bad, Matt, you're just another citizen of the Genesis 3 world. E.C. Hoskyns writes that when we in the Church recognize our common condition: "There emerges an equality in human life, an equality that breaks down all distinctions... and at this point there opens up a most attractive territory... the territory of faith in the mercy of God."

That radical equality that opens the territory of faith in the mercy of God is how we are able to respond to the sins and wrongs of others with the kind of response that I received from my friend. Not with surprise, not with disgust, not with judgment, not with condemnation; but with empathy and understanding. Because whoever we are, we all share one story: and it starts with Genesis 3. It is not just the story of people we do not like, people whose lives and perspectives we do not agree with, or the people who we cast off as those other people, because they are supposed to be our enemies. Genesis 3 is the human story. But so is the death and

resurrection of Jesus Christ to redeem a world that God made, that God considered good, and that God loves enough to die for.

Because that is true, everything I have said this morning about Genesis 2 and 3, what is natural, Jesus, God, the New Adam and ourselves can all be summarized like this: “where Genesis 3 increased, Jesus abounded all the more.” Amen.