

Encountering God

By: Meagan McLaughlin

February 26, 2020. During the 40 days of Lent, the stories we will hear of all of the encounters that Jesus had with people, and the encounters they had with God in Jesus, show us that God wants nothing more than to meet us right where we are. On this Ash Wednesday we welcome our new pastor, Meagan McLaughlin. She preaches on the story of Adam and Eve, and how no matter how much we may mess up, it can't change the fact that God created us in God's image and will never stop loving us.

Readings: Genesis 2:15-17, Genesis 3:1-7

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I spent much of my life feeling like the key to gaining friends and influencing people was to be perfect. Mistakes were horrifying, asking for help was not an option, and being anything but totally in control was pretty much intolerable. Can anyone relate to that? In order to be okay, I could not be human -- I could not be anything less than superhuman. In short, to be okay, I basically had to be God! Just like Adam and Eve in our story today.

And of course, that is not possible, for us human beings. And so I constantly felt the weight of falling short of my own ideals, and when I did fall short, the easiest thing to do was to cast blame as far from me as I could possibly throw it. Try to pretend that I'm more than human. And what I came to realize is I wasn't fooling anybody, least of all God!

And I think that this, perhaps, is one of the great lessons that we can learn from this ancient tale of Adam and Eve. When we make mistakes, God sees through all of the excuses and the distractions and the blame, and knows the truth: we mess up, just like Adam and Eve did in this legendary tale from the very beginning. Of course we do, we are human after all! And God knows this, no matter how hard we may try to hide. It didn't work for Adam and Eve, it didn't work for Cain, and it doesn't work for us either.

This is not, however, the only lesson of Adam and Eve, although we often get stuck there, and sometimes in the worst possible way: Eve disobeyed God and ate the apple, and drew Adam into her sin. Evil temptress woman! And then, God threw us out of the garden to suffer. But this is actually not the beginning of the story, and it isn't the end of the story either.

All of the angst and the shame and the mistakes and consequences of Adam and Eve cannot erase the real beginning of the story. No matter how much we may mess up, it can't change the fact that God created us in God's image. God spoke words calling us into being. God shaped and formed us with God's own hands. God breathed life into us. And when we breathe, God's very Spirit fills us again, and again, and again. And, when Adam and Eve were ashamed about their nakedness, God provided clothing for them. Our translation says, a couple of verses after our reading today, God gave them clothing made of skin, a profound connection to the human creation that they were. We know through God's provision of clothes, and God's protection of Cain after he killed Abel, that God will never stop loving us, even when we have done great harm.

We know that God will never, ever give up on us. God is so committed to loving us, redeeming us, and bringing us home, that he came to us in Jesus, even though God knew that our sinfulness would result

in Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. In Jesus, you might say that God has some serious skin in the game! And God continues to come to us today, because we are God's beloved children and nothing can ever change that. God created us to be precisely human, after all!

We human beings, in this human life we live, are complicated! There's a reason we Lutherans like to talk about so many "both-and's." As we begin Lent, we can hear echoes of Martin Luther telling us that we are all simultaneously sinners and saints. We are humans, imperfect beings who sin -- make mistakes, harm other people and ourselves and God, by what we do and what we fail to do. And, we are humans, beloved children created by God, with an amazing capacity for love, compassion, healing, and joy.

In Lent, we are reminded to embrace the full truth of who we are, both sinner and saint, beloved of God. We are called during these 40 days not to make excuses, not to place blame on others, not to distract from our brokenness and the brokenness of the world, but to acknowledge the areas of our lives that are impacted by sin, that need healing and forgiveness. We are challenged to take the finger we may have pointing at others and point it back at ourselves, and look at our own lives and our own part in our relationships, and invite God in.

Where have we been dishonest in our relationships with God, ourselves, or others? Where have we contributed to the brokenness and oppression in the world, whether by what we have said or done, or by failing to stand up for those who are suffering? How can we learn to be more present for the people in our lives, and less distracted by those things that really don't matter in the end? What can we do these 40 days of Lent to grow our capacity for love, honesty, compassion, justice, and joy?

Because the whole story of Jesus -- all of the stories that we will hear these 40 days, all of the encounters that Jesus had with people, and the encounters they had with God in Jesus -- show us that God wants nothing more than to meet us right where we are. God wants nothing more than to love, and reconcile, and forgive, and heal.

And as we listen to the stories we will hear this Lent, we will know that Jesus crossed a lot of lines that his community didn't think he should cross -- talking to a woman, a Samaritan woman at that. Healing a man born blind, on the Sabbath, and denying that sin caused the blindness in the first place. Suggesting that God, far from wanting us to follow rules perfectly to earn God's love, asks us to embody God's love and mercy and justice, as best we can, for those that we encounter.

Because often, it is in our encounters with other humans, and creation, that we encounter God, and are transformed. The love extended to us by another just when we feel at our most lost and unlovable reveals the unconditional, unfathomable love that God has for us, perfect or not. Healing, reconciliation, life emerge in us and around us, and we know God is there. And we, humans created by this amazing God, have a great capacity to witness God in our world, and reveal the love and mercy of God to all of those that we encounter on our journeys.

During these 40 days, we can prepare for Holy Week and Easter by focusing on prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. In prayer, we commit time to focus on our relationship with God, acknowledging that we need God in our lives. In fasting, we let go of the things that specifically get in our way, and make room for healing and love to come in and change us. In almsgiving, we look for ways to be of service to the world around us, trusting in the abundance of God for all people.

All of this we do in the spirit of the theme that we are focusing on this Lent. Encountering God in the

World. We open our eyes and hearts and minds to the world around us, and we see God in our neighborhoods, our communities, our workplaces, our schools. We encounter God in this community of faith, week after week, as we gather here together.

We walk these 40 days together, and it starts today. It starts with worship, prayer, sharing Communion. Or let's not forget, it actually started downstairs with a feast. I'm still full, I don't know about you. Tonight we will receive ashes to remind us of our humanity, to remind us of our mortality. As a community, we see our own brokenness and sinfulness, and we see the brokenness of this world with no excuses, and we are reminded profoundly of the need that we have for God. We are, as our hymn of the day suggests, restored to love, and power, and joy, and grace, in Christ who lived our human experience.

As we prepare ourselves to go out into the world, embodying the love and mercy of God, and witnessing the breath of the Spirit all around us. And we do this because we know we have a God who will never fail us, even when we, at times in our humanness, fail God.

Thanks be to God!

*** Keywords ***

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