## Invitation to the Table

Jeremiah is known as the reluctant prophet, the "weeping prophet." He preached during the final years before Jerusalem fell to the Babylonian army. In the book that bears his name, chapter 31 is thought to be an eyewitness account of the fall of Jerusalem

His message called for Judean leaders to clean up their act and walk in the way of God; but the leaders and most of the people were arrogant in their presumptuous faith that the temple of YHWH was their guarantee that God would protect them. Early in his ministry he cried out:

> *For from the least to the greatest of them,*
> *everyone is greedy for unjust gain;*
> *and from prophet to priest,*
> *everyone deals falsely.*
> *They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,*
> *saying, "Peace, peace,"*
> *when there is no peace.* (6:13-14)

Sound familiar? Leaders offered superficial reassurances, and empty promises of safety while ignoring deep-seated injustice, moral decay, and imminent danger. Judea lived in a state of denial and deception, claiming stability despite crumbling political and moral infrastructure.

At the Table with his disciples, Jesus offered a different kind of peace: *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you.* (JOHN 14:27). The peace of Christ contrasts the temporary, transactional peace offered by the world by offering a lasting peace that transcends private serenity, reaches across political and religious differences, and unites all people.

A pipe dream? That's up to us. Did you vote?

Our communion hymn is #419, "All Who Hunger, Gather Gladly"

## Pastoral Prayer

James Madison, a Founding Father, the 4th U.S. President (1809–1817), and "Father of the Constitution" for drafting the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights, wrote in the "Federalist Paper #41, wrote, *"A standing military force, with an overgrown Executve, will not long be safe companions to liberty."*

Oscar Romero, 20th-century archbishop of El Salvador, wrote: (#678 in our hymnal)

> *Peace is not the product of terror or fear.*
> *Peace is not the silence of cemeteries.*
> *Peace is not the result of violent repression.*
> *Peace is the generous, tranquil contribution of all to the good of all.*
> *Peace is dynamism. Peace is generosity.*
> *It is right and duty.*

Jesus of Nazareth said, *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God."* (MATTHEW 5:12)

Pray with me:

God of grace and peace, you call us to unity, not in uniformity; not in the same beliefs and political opinions, because the only thing we have in common is our need of your grace. In the spirit of Christ we discover unity, not in spite of, but because we are a church of diversity and inclusion. In the spirit of Christ, we see life and faith through a lens of faith, rather than through the lens of politics. Through the lens of faith we refuse to see our neighbors as enemies, whether they be in Tehran, Tel Aviv, the School Board or the halls of congress.

"In the face of yet another war, our hearts are filled with deep anguish. The continued decision to resort to war is a failure of human responsibility before You. And so we pray fervently. Strengthen us so we don't let prayer become a substitute for responsibility. Let our prayers be joined with courageous and concrete action. Lead us to stand publicly with those who are afflicted, to advocate persistently for a just peace that safeguards the dignity and security of all people, and to challenge policy makers whose narratives make endless war appear inevitable."

Grant us insight to effectively promote peace..."to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God." (Micah 6:8)

In this waring culture, we reaffirm our faith in your nature as a peace-loving God who neither blesses nor desires war but calls all nations to "beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks."

"Let there be peace on earth; and let it begin with me;" in the name of the Prince of Peace. Amen.

## Who Told You You Were Naked?

GENESIS 3:1-11, 21 (NRSVUE) *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'?"* 2 *The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden,* 3 *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.'"* 4 *But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die,* 5 *for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."* 6 *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.* 7 *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.* 8 *They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.* 9 *But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?"* 10 *He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself."* 11 *He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"* 12 *The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate."* … 21 *And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife and clothed them.*

***

**The Word of God for the people of God!**

The serpent said, "…you will be like God…" But the thing is: they already were like God! *Not* God, but like God:

> *So God created humans in his image,*
> *in the image of God he created them;*
> *male and female he created them.* (GENESIS 2:27)

Sin is measured by the degree that we individually and corporately fail—and too often blatantly refuse—to live up to that image and possibility created within us. And the greatest rationalization for sin is, "I'm only human."

And when we call for people to follow Jesus and grow into "the measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13), a common response is, "But he's the Son of God; I'm only human."

***Horse feathers!*** Jesus said to his disciples, *"…the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these…"* (JOHN 14:12)

So, in today's reading, the human temptation to be like God by knowing good from evil is counterbalanced by the overwhelming realization that if we know the difference, we will be held accountable for our decisions and our actions.

Note the contrasts between the primary actors of the narrative: God acts with strong and decisive verbs: "Let there be light." "Let us make humans." God formed, God breathed, God planted, God made, God commanded. God is a self-starter, capable of transformative action. But there are no adjectives for God, just verbs.

In contrast, the serpent has no strong verbs, does nothing, has no power to act, is incapable of transformative action. He's all talk. But he is "crafty;" he can parlay his only skill into manipulative marketing. And note that the Hebrew word translated "crafty" is a play on the word "naked." The second chapter of Genesis ends, ***"And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed."*** (GENESIS 2:25)

So, here's an interesting question: at what point in human evolution did nakedness become shameful? and why? I mean, when I step out of the shower and look in the mirror, I get it; but that's vanity; that's embarrassment. I ain't no Brad Pitt! But shame?

But wait a minute: in Genesis 2 they were naked and not ashamed; but then in today's reading the serpent comes; and when they follow the way of the serpent, and their eyes are opened, the man says, "I was *afraid* because I was naked…"

And God's response is, "Who told you you were naked?"

Note: the problem is not nakedness: the problem is that humanity's shameless innocence is shattered, deformed, and turned into fear. Fear has entered the garden and corrupted God's human enterprise. God had created a relationship of innocent intimacy, but fear creates a profound tension between God and humanity.

Ninety-three years ago FDR addressed this nation and said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." It's always fear that does a people in. That's why the Bible insists that the opposite of love is not hate; it's fear: ***"perfect love expels all fear"*** (I JOHN 4:18). Love urges us to confront the realities of life creatively. But while love seeks truth, fear seeks safety.

Actually, fear distorts the truth, not by exaggerating the ills of the world (which would be difficult to do) but by underestimating our ability, with God's help, to deal with them.

Fear seeks safety, and safety lies in failure. What we most fear is not the evil in the world, or in ourselves, but the GOOD in us; because to realize it would be just too demanding, and accountability is just too heavy a burden.

"My son, your sins are forgiven." That's passive and comforting.

"Rise, take up your bed and walk." That's frightening.

It is easier to be guilty than to be responsible, so most people adopt a strategy of protective failure: "You can't lose any money if you don't place any bets." "You can't fall out of bed if you sleep on the floor."

And if we can feel that fate—or Republicans or Democrats, or liberals or conservatives—make us a failure, we won't feel so bad about being one. ***"The woman you gave me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate."*** See, it's God's fault!

And so, the Serpent has achieved his purpose. He has contradicted the

intention and promise of God by taking humanity out of the zone of God's faithful promise and the reciprocal human practice of trust. The serpent makes God's speech in the garden doubtful and negotiable; he creates options for the human creature outside the options God has voiced and authorized. And the result is a fear that alienates humanity from the creator.

The serpent then disappears from Israel's narrative. The terrible work is done through speech that is, in fact, without force or authority, but believed by gullible, mistrusting humankind. The story sorts out the competing, conflicting voices that seek to define human destiny.[1]

Lent offers a contrast. Jesus is confronted by the same force, but instead of a serpent, it's the devil. At the end of the story, Jesus says, "Begone, Satan!" Satan is not a proper name. The word simply means accuser. In Job the satan is the court appointed prosecuting attorney. Since medieval times art has depicted the satan as a monstrous being—a devil with horns and a forked tail. But who would be tempted by that? In the Genesis narrative Eve says, "The serpent *beguiled* me…" The word means charming, enchanting, irresistibly attractive, often with an underlying hint of deception. In the NRSVUE she says, "The serpent 'tricked' me."

In the wilderness, the accuser comes to Jesus with a Bible under his arm! Matthew says the accuser ***"took him to the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you're the Son of God, jump, for it is written,***

***'He will command his angels concerning you,'***
***and 'On their hands they will bear you up,***
***so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"*** **(5:5-6)**

Imagine! The devil quoting scripture! And for those in our Lenten Discussion Group, this a biblical example of selective literalism taken out of context, and it is on the lips of the devil.

God created humans and placed them in a garden that provided every need and then walked with them in the cool of the evening. *Of course*! it's metaphor; but the message is that creator and creature enjoyed an intimacy that was shattered by beguiling trickery and has eluded humanity ever since.

This story is the basis of the theology of original sin; but the word sin does not appear in the text. Nor do the words rebellion, disobedience, evil, or guilt; and the word, shame or ashamed is not there aside from Genesis 2:25 that says the man and the woman were naked and were ***not*** ashamed.

This story is not about sin; it's more like a story of humanity growing up—maybe in that "terrible twos" age. Innocent (and obviously naïve and gullible) humanity is tricked into eating the forbidden fruit like a typical two-year-old child

[1] The previous two paragraphs are adapted from Walter Breuggemann's comments in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year A* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) page 183-85.

who is tempted by the very words: "Hot! Don't touch!" What's he gonna' do? And what is a good mother gonna' do? (put a salve on it and comfort the child).

So the narrative closes on an image of divine grace: When fear replaces intimacy, the -creator covers the source of the fear: ***And the Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife and clothed them.***

Through many dangers, toils, and snares
I have already come!
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home. Amen.