

Where Death Reigns, Grace Triumphs

by Linda Rex

February 26, 2023, 1st Sunday in Preparation for Easter / Lent—I’ve been pondering the way in which we as human beings so often trade in our relationships with God and others for things that ultimately don’t satisfy. I believe this began in the garden of Eden, in that conversation Eve had with the serpent who deceived her. He told her that when she ate the forbidden fruit, her eyes would be opened and she would be like God, knowing good from evil.

When reading over that part of the creation story, we often miss the subtle detail of what Adam and Eve turned their back on when they chose to disregard God’s instruction to leave alone the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. What we fail to see and appreciate is the magnitude of what Adam and Eve had from the beginning—a personal relationship with the God who created them, a warm fellowship characterized by walking and talking together, sharing life in union and communion with Father, Son, and Spirit.

It is instructive that the serpent or Satan told Eve, and she believed it, that being “like God” meant that she would know good and evil. The knowing that she and Adam were created for was not this kind of knowing, but that which involved both the knowledge of who God was, but also knowing God in an intimate and personal way. Walking and talking with God, living in face-to-face relationship, is what humans were created for, and Adam and Eve traded this in for the knowledge of good and evil.

When their eyes were “opened,” what they saw wasn’t the truth any longer. Sin had entered their existence, and with it, death, and when they encountered God again in the garden, they couldn’t face him anymore. So, they hid. And human beings have been hiding from God ever since. Shame, guilt, and blindness kept them from seeing that God had not changed at all—they were the ones who were so alienated in their minds that they could no longer see the truth.

What the apostle Paul shares in the New Testament reading for this Sunday, Romans 5:12–19, is the lengths to which God went to make this whole situation right. Because of the one man, Adam, sin entered the world, and therefore death entered the world. Adam set the course of humanity on the path to death and destruction—returning back to the nothingness out of which God had made everything. But God, being God, was not content to allow this to happen without doing what was needed to restore and renew all things.

In the garden of Eden story, following their rebellion, God walks into the garden looking for Adam and Eve, but they are hiding. What does God do? He seeks them out and calls them back into relationship with himself. When he sees they are uncomfortable with their nakedness, he, through the shedding of animal blood, clothes them. He tells them the consequence of their choices—the result of sin, but then offers them hope in his promise of a redeemer.

In the fullness of time, God kept that promise, in the person of Jesus Christ. Here, a human being, who was the Son of God in human flesh, came to live a genuinely human life in face to face relationship with Father in the Spirit. Jesus did what Adam did not do. In the gospel reading for this Sunday, Matthew 4:1-11, we learn about the new Adam, Jesus Christ, and his encounter with “the serpent” Satan during his time of testing in the wilderness after forty days of fasting.

During this spiritual battle, Satan challenged Jesus in three ways, what the apostle John calls “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1 John 2:16 NIV). Looking back to Eden, we find these same temptations are a common occurrence in our human flesh. The consequence of our yielding to them in sin is and has been death. When we try to resolve these

on our own, through law keeping or even ignoring them, we find ourselves even more enslaved by sin. It is only in Christ that we have any hope of redemption.

The wonder of what God has done to resolve what occurred in Adam, is seen in the one man Jesus Christ, in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, and even in the sending of the Spirit by which all of us can individually participate in his intimate relationship with Father in the Spirit. We, by faith, can now experience the union and communion we were created for—coming to know not just about God, but to know him personally and relationally as his adopted children. We can live now and forever triumphant over evil, sin, and death because of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ's obedience in the face of profound temptation from the evil one has undone Adam's, and therefore humanity's, disobedience and sin. Jesus' righteousness, or right relationship with God, has become our own righteousness. Jesus' justification has undone our injustice and rebellion, restoring us and making us one with God. Death itself has been defeated, such that we participate now and forever in the eternal life Jesus spoke of, that of knowing the Father, and him whom he sent (John 17:3). Every one of us is invited to live this out, as we trust in Jesus' perfect work in our place and on our behalf, and receive his gift of the Spirit of life everlasting, embracing our place as beloved children of our Father.

Thank you, Father, for your great love and faithfulness. Thank you, Jesus, for coming for us, facing temptation, and triumphing over evil, sin, and death. As we live in face-to-face relationship with you, dear God, may your heavenly Spirit, manifest anew in and through us all the righteousness and goodness of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

"Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned—for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many. The gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification. For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous." Romans 5:12–19 NASB