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"Grace Abounding" GPPC 3-1-20, rev.
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7, Romans 5:12-19

As you know, this is the first Sunday in the Christian season of Lent, forty days in which we're invited to reflect upon our lives and to turn more fully toward God's purposes and love. Our congregational theme for Lent is, "Building a Beloved Community: A Matthew 25 Journey to the Cross," and the biblical texts for worship over the next few weeks, lead us in that direction. This morning we probe the familiar Adam and Eve story in Genesis and then look at Paul's remarkable interpretation of that story in the light of Christ.

Notice the movement of this narrative, certainly not literal history but told almost like a children's story complete with a talking snake. God puts the man and the woman in the Garden of Eden with work to do. They are simply to till the ground and to keep watch over and preserve the garden. This work is not something evil or unpleasant. And they are expected to care for, watch over, certainly not misuse, the creation entrusted to them.

Some of Guilford Park's members have a farm, Providence Farm is its name, and they not only have some crops but pigs, goats, chickens, cows, horses, dogs, and the list goes on. As they will tell you, they own the farm, but in another sense the farm owns them, because it requires a tremendous amount

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of time and care. In Genesis, Adam and Eve do not actually own the garden. It belongs to God, and this is a paradigm for humanity and creation; we human beings are caretakers and stewards placed into God's world to practice environmental justice.

The man and woman in the story are even given guidelines for their life in the garden. One rule—don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Eat from any other tree (vegetarianism is assumed), but do not eat from the one tree or you will die that very day. So we have a good creation, responsible work for people to do, and we have limits, one command from God, one measly command.

Well, along comes the serpent slithering over. "Can we talk?" And at this point in biblical understanding the talking snake is just a talking snake, not Satan, not the embodiment of evil. The snake is said to be the craftiest of God's wild animals. And the Hebrew word for crafty is ambiguous; it can mean shrewd or sensible. Or it can mean cunning. "Sssso," hisses the snake, "Did God sssay, 'You sssshall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" And see how the woman (created as the man's equal partner) responds. "We can eat from any tree in the garden, but God said we can't eat from the tree in the middle of

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the garden, or touch it, or we'll die." What do you notice about her answer?

You notice she has added something God did *not* say, the part about not *touching* the tree. So she has told the first lie.

But the crafty snake says, "Nah. You won't die. God knows when you eat from the tree your eyes will be opened, and you'll be like God, and know good and evil." So the woman sees that this fruit appears good, delightful, desirable to make people wise, prudent, understanding. So she eats the fruit, gives some to her husband, and then they *do* know. They know they are naked. They know they are vulnerable. And so they sew clothing for themselves. And we remember how the story ends with God questioning the couple in the garden. The man blames the woman *and* God for providing this partner, and the woman blames the snake. In other words, "Yes, there is such a thing as responsibility, but *we* are not responsible. Someone else is."

One biblical commentator says the human beings are given "vocation" (work to do), "permission," and "prohibition." But, he writes, "The speech of the indicted couple is revealing, . . . it is all 'I.' Therein lies the primal offense: "I heard . . . , I was afraid . . . , I was naked; I hid. . . . I ate. . . . their preoccupation with the Gardener, with his vocation, his permission, his

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prohibition, has been given up. Now the preoccupation is ‘I.’ . . . Life is turned back on self.” (Walter Bruggeman, *Genesis*, The Interpretation Commentary Series, 46 and 49.)

The story does not explain why there’s evil or clarify the origin of evil. The story is not a dissertation on “The Fall” or “Original Sin”—words that do not occur here. And, of course, the story is not literal, and it’s not an indictment of women or of God’s good gift of human sexuality. No. It’s something else.

Author Donald Miller says, “The most difficult lie I have ever contended with is this: Life is a story about me.” (Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality*, 182.)

Genesis exposes that lie to the laser light of God’s love. Genesis announces that life is a story about God. But, over and over, we human beings forget and deny that truth. How many of our thoughts in an average hour are about ourselves? And how many of our thoughts are about God or other people? How much of our time, energy, and money is spent on ourselves and how much is spent for others, especially the needy whom God calls us to care for? How willing are we to support policies, including taxes, that will cause us some discomfort but help protect the children, the poor, and vulnerable? And

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though, yes, there are genuinely difficult moral quandaries in our lives, isn't it true that most of the time we know very well what we should think, say, and do, and we simply choose to do what *we* want, even if we know it is against God's will?

As Mark Twain said, "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts I do understand." With few exceptions, like Adam and Eve, we know the boundaries. We just choose to ignore them and sometimes we even try to blame others for our failures.

Enter Saint Paul and his remarkable take on the Genesis story. Paul writes, "Sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned . . ." Paul views sin like a contagious virus that spreads like a pandemic so that all humankind and all the world is affected. We human beings are born into a world in which everything and everyone is somehow infected by sin and brokenness.

I like to go running in the countryside near Oak Ridge where Beth and I live. And a few months ago, a few weeks before Halloween, I noticed that some neighbors had decorated their house for the season. The most prominent decoration they had was a full-sized plastic skeleton sitting on their front porch

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steps. This thing looked like a real skeleton--pretty cool. And it stayed there for weeks. When it got close to Thanksgiving, they put a pumpkin beside it, the skeleton resting its arm on the pumpkin. Near Christmas, they put a red and white Santa hat on the skeleton. Around Valentine's Day, I think it held flowers or a heart or something (a romantic skeleton). The skeleton, without any extra clothes, was still sitting there yesterday. What a weird and playful symbol of the ubiquity of sin and death. I wonder what the skeleton will do on Easter.

For Paul, Adam not only introduces sin and death into the world but he is a symbol for all of us, because we all choose to sin. And this is no small matter, a little ding in the car door, a misspelled word in an email. No. Sin means death. As one scholar writes, "Paul is trying to impress on us that Christ did not die and rise again merely to provide a bit of needed improvement, or to fill some gaps in our life. He died to save us from a mortal disease that lies at the core of our being, affecting all of our thoughts, words, and deeds, and corrupting human society as a whole." (Christopher A. Beely in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Vol. 2*, 40.)

That's our predicament. What are we going to do?

Well, oddly enough, we cannot free ourselves by buying the latest self-

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help book and then applying sheer force of will. We are disobedient Adam, and merely trying harder often just gets us into more trouble as we frantically try to save ourselves. Instead, says Paul, God has come in the obedient Christ. And God in Christ has done what needed to be done for us. As one professor puts it, “Adam gets us all toward death, and that is fairly impressive. Christ brings us all to life, and that is beyond words to tell.” (David L. Bartlett, *Romans* in the Westminster Bible Companion, 58.)

Paul describes the free gift of grace as “abounding.” The Greek word means more than enough. It means abundance. It means so much there are leftovers. God’s grace is not a stingy, pinched, calculating thing. No. God’s grace is an unmerited, overflowing, joyous, *abounding* gift. Can we remember that? Can we hold on to that when we sin? Can we be inspired by that as we seek to live faithful lives? Can we even imitate that gift as we forgive others? Maybe at Easter even take the skeleton off the porch and replace it with an empty cross? Abounding grace.

There is a scene near the end of Marilynne Robinson’s novel titled, *Home*. The wayward adult son, Jack, has finally returned home. He sits across from his aged father, a sometimes crotchety retired Presbyterian minister.

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Jack says to his dad, “I deserve rebuke.”

“[His father answers] ‘You ought to let the Lord decide what you deserve. You think about that too much, what you deserve. I believe that is part of your problem.’

“Jack smiled, ‘I believe you may have a point.’

“‘Nobody deserves anything, good or bad [said his father]. It’s all grace. If you accepted that, you might be able to relax a little.’

“Jack said, ‘Somehow I have never felt that grace was intended for me, particularly.’

“His father said, ‘Oh nonsense! That’s just nonsense!’” (Marilynne Robinson, *Home*, 271.)

I suppose it’s customary on this first Sunday of Lent to send the congregation members out urging them to try harder not to sin, not to break the protective boundaries God sets, to give up something (a sin), and to take something on (a service). I suppose that’s right. I commend it to you and myself.

But let me also send you out remembering God’s grace is meant for all the world *particularly*. And it is abounding, *abounding*, greater than the sin,

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life more powerful than death. Life, the last word sitting on the porch. So we can also relax a little and trust a lot. Through Jesus Christ our gracious and abounding Lord. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal