

Sermon Starters

Lent 2008

by Matt Kelley

February 10 - March 16

February 10

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

The easiest way to get someone to do something is to tell them they can't do it. This has literally been the case from the beginning. Adam and Eve had a great thing going but it wasn't enough. They just had to go eat from the one tree that God told them to stay away from. And now we have to wear clothes, toil in the land, experience pain in giving birth, and eventually die. All because there's something inside of us that makes us yearn to do the one thing we're not supposed to.

One thing I've never been able to figure out is why God put that tree in the Garden in the first place. I mean, he created Adam and Eve. God had to know they were going to do the one thing they weren't supposed to do. So why even have it there? This is a question without a definitive answer, of course. The writer of Genesis never says why God put the tree there, just that it was there and that Adam and Eve ate. While it's a question worth considering, be it in Philosophy 101 or around a table in a coffee shop, the fact remains that Sin is in the world and it's a big, big problem.

Matthew brings the Sin issue full circle. In this particular gospel Jesus is the new Adam, the new Moses, and the new Israel all at once, and he fares much better than Adam and Eve did when facing temptation. Jesus stands out in the desert having a theological battle-royal with Satan, but he never gives in. They keep trading Bible verses back and forth until the devil gives up and goes home, leaving Jesus to take a badly needed shower.

At this point, the preacher gets his or her golden opportunity to say, "This is why you'd better memorize a whole bunch of Bible verses, so you too can triumph over the Devil!", but I don't think that's really the point. Jesus overcame Satan's temptations, but not because he was a better proof-texter than the devil. He overcame temptation because he was free from Sin.

When we say Jesus was free from Sin, we're talking about a whole lot more than never breaking any of God's commandments (because, as I recall, he broke more than a few Sabbath laws). There are individual transgressions we call sins (lower case "s"), but the key to Jesus' overcoming temptation, and the problem that Adam and Eve had to start with, was Sin (capital "S"). Another word we could use is estrangement: a broken relationship. Adam and Eve's relationship with God was already broken when they decided they knew better than God and to eat the fruit. Jesus was fully God and fully human, so even though he was tempted, he could clearly see what was and was not God's will. Through Jesus we can not only see what a fully restored relationship with God looks like, but we can also experience that relationship in him. Thanks be to God.

February 17, 2008

Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17 or Matthew 17:1-9

Father Abraham had many sons. Many sons had Father Abraham. I am one of them, and so are you (ladies included), so let's all praise the Lord!

That's the first thing most of us raised in Sunday school learned about Abraham. He's our spiritual ancestor, and he's the common link we have not only with our Jewish brothers and sisters, but with our Muslim brothers and sisters as well. We're all family because of Abraham, so we should all just get along.

As we get older and read Genesis for ourselves, we discover that this whole thing was a little bit more complicated than the Bible school song let on. The story of Abraham is actually a very strange one. He gets up and leaves his homeland because some deity he's never heard of (who turns out to be the God of the universe, but good ol' Abe doesn't know that at the time) tells him to. This God promises him a child in his old age but takes so long to deliver on this promise that Abraham impregnates a slave girl, only to have a child with his wife as well, and send the first son and his mother off to die in the wilder-


ness to avoid a fight over his small inheritance. Oh, and let's not forget that whole "kill my son because God says so" incident!

As strange as the story is in places, Abraham remains a pillar of our faith because of his obedience to God. And it's this obedience—even in the midst of doubt, misunderstanding, and frequent mistakes—that makes this story so valuable and relevant for us thousands of years later. Paul talks at length about the example Abraham sets because Abraham is an active recipient of God's grace. He didn't earn his salvation by doing what he did, but neither did he simply take God's grace for granted and do nothing with it. Paul is reminding us that we can't earn our salvation by doing all the right things, but neither should we simply pray one prayer and go on living our lives as if Jesus had never come.

Jesus himself also talks about what it is to be an active recipient of God's grace. In his late night conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus coins the phrase "born again". That's a term that has become very loaded in the last two millennia. Being born is not something we choose to happen to us, but we participate in the process of being born nonetheless. It's some mixture of our actions, the actions of our parents and others who care for us, and the actions of God. We can understand a lot about the concept of childbirth, but in the end it remains a beautiful mystery. Just like Abram received the new name Abraham to signify his new life, we too are being continually reborn and remade into God's likeness. We doubt, we stumble, and we make mistakes, but God never gives up on us, because God is just that good.

A good journey begins with knowing where we are, and being willing to go somewhere else.

-- Richard Rohr



February 24, 2008

Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 95; Romans 5:1-11;
John 4:5-42

“Do you ever feel like you just don’t belong anywhere?”

This question was posed to me by an older and wiser colleague of mine a while back during a conference attended by pastors from many different denominations. We had both been recently informed that we had been appointed to new churches, and we were both anxious about the upcoming transition.

“All the time,” I replied.

That was the end of the conversation. Nothing more needed to be said. In that moment we recognized a tremendous kinship with one another because we both found ourselves in the wilderness.

The wilderness is an important symbol in the Bible, significant because it stands in contrast to the safety and civility of the city. In the city all of your needs are met, you are protected from the elements and predators, there are lots of things to see and do, and you can be secure in your surroundings. The wilderness is a whole different story. In the wilderness you don’t know where your next meal or drink of water is coming from, you don’t know where your next lodging will be, you are at the mercy of nature, and you are all alone. In the wilderness there are no distractions and there are no protections. It’s just you and God. So, it’s no surprise that our most powerful images of God’s might, God’s wrath, God’s protection, and God’s provision for our every need emerge during times that biblical figures found themselves in the wilderness.

Sometimes we find ourselves in a wilderness even if we’re in the city. The Samaritan woman lived among the people in Sychar, but she was all alone in the crowd. She had to come to the well during the hottest part of the day to avoid the stares and whispers of her neighbors. It is here, in her own personal wilderness, that she meets Jesus. This brief encounter at the well heals her where she is most vulnerable and most broken. Like the Israelites in the wilderness, this woman had to come to a place where God was all she had to realize that God was all she needed.

During Lent some of us give up things like sweets, red meat, or bad habits. Some of us even fast and pray. The whole idea is that the absence

of a certain familiar thing creates a kind of wilderness for us so we can focus on God’s presence in our lives. During this season, let’s also keep an eye out for those among us that find themselves in a long term wilderness. Let us, like Jesus, offer the living water of love and fellowship for which they so greatly thirst.

March 2, 2008

1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians
5:8-14; John 9:1-41

Recognizing what God is up to isn’t easy. It never has been. Perhaps that’s because God consistently defies our expectations, showing us what’s really important and reminding us who’s really in charge.

This is exactly the situation Samuel finds himself in. Being God’s prophet has never been an easy job, as Samuel knows. The people cried out for a king, and even though God said it was a really bad idea, he relented and told Samuel to take care of it. So Samuel picked the most natural choice for a king. He picked Saul, who was the biggest, strongest, most popular guy. Sounds great, right? Except that Saul kept defying God, and he never had any interest in seeking after God’s will. He wanted to do his own thing. So God decides to go a different direction and choose a king whose qualifications are less obvious. Samuel goes out to find the one that God has chosen, and it’s the least likely candidate of all: the youngest son of a peasant family whose father doesn’t even invite him to the meeting. Instead he’s out tending the sheep, which is not the most prestigious job. Nevertheless, David is God’s choice. It’s not that David will be perfect, either. We all know about David’s rather significant moral failings, but the difference between him and Saul is that, as God says, David is a man after God’s own heart. He messes up a lot, but he cares about knowing and following God’s will. What’s really important is David’s heart, according to this passage. God knew David was the right guy to be king, even though his kingly qualifications weren’t apparent from the outside.

The Pharisees had a tough time recognizing what God was up to, as well. Jesus comes along and heals a blind man with some spit and mud (which, admittedly, is probably not an everyday occurrence), and they don’t even believe that the

guy running around claiming that he’s been healed is the same guy. They think it’s some kind of hoax, because they know this Jesus character isn’t really a man of God. He’s from a peasant family, he’s not formally educated, he doesn’t have a priestly office, and his actions consistently defy the authority that the Pharisees so enjoy lording over everybody else. Because Jesus is so far outside the box that the religious authorities have created for God, they can’t recognize that God is at work. These guys are the ones that are supposed to know God the best, and yet they’re the most clueless.


Sometimes, our expectations of God are our biggest barrier to seeing God working in the world. It starts out innocently enough, of course. We learn something about God, maybe we even have a powerful experience of God’s presence with us, and this forms our understanding of who God is. But slowly, over time, our exciting and unprecedented experience of God becomes the rod against which all experiences of God are measured, and we start to think someone else’s experience of God has to look and feel like ours to be legitimate. Suddenly we realize we’re worshipping our own knowledge instead of worshipping God.

So what does God do? God does something unexpected to break us out of the box we’ve constructed for our faith. God chooses someone we didn’t expect, does something amazing, if for no other reason to show us that God is God, and we’re not. All we can hope to do is hang on and expect the unexpected. Strap in. It’s going to be a wonderful ride.

March 9, 2008

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11;
John 11:1-45

I wonder what Lazarus thought about being raised from the dead. The writer of John doesn’t tell us what he thought. Lazarus doesn’t even get a word in edgewise, which I guess is understandable since his family is so hysterical about everything that was happening. Still, I can’t help but wonder how he felt. On one hand he could have been pretty happy. He died relatively young, which wasn’t uncommon in that time, but like most people, he probably wanted to live a long, full life. On the other hand, Lazarus might have been quite content to remain



dead. Perhaps he had made peace with passing over to the other side. Having already died once, was Lazarus less afraid to die a second time? Did he go about living his life differently after he came back?

I'm pretty sure that someone who knew Lazarus wouldn't have asked him these kinds of questions, however. In the Jewish faith as we understand it to have been in the first century, there wasn't much of a concept of an afterlife. The idea that the soul is separate from the body is Greek in origin, and while people in Judea knew of the idea at the time, it wasn't entrenched in their communal narrative the way it is in ours now. Contemporaries of Lazarus and Jesus believed the longer you lived, the better. No one stood around at funerals and said, "Well, he's in a better place," because the concept that there was any other "place" to which one might go was still a matter of great debate among religious leaders, and probably was not discussed much among the common people. Lazarus may not have even had the words to describe the miracle he experienced, of dying and being revived.

The possibility of new life was very mysterious and exciting to the prophet Ezekiel, too. He sees a vision of dry bones: the signs that life once existed but it's now gone, never to come back. God asks him a strange question: can these bones live? Ezekiel is probably thinking, "umm, no..." but he's been a prophet long enough to know that with God, there's always a twist. God tells Ezekiel to command the bones to live, and suddenly the bones come together, muscles and tendons and ligaments appear, and then flesh! It's alive! Ezekiel then gives an interpretive clue: the bones are the House of Israel: the whole people of God. They've been wiped off the map, but against all logic Ezekiel is telling them that it's not over. Anything is possible with God. They have a future!

What are the dry bones in our world? What relationships with friends or relatives are so strained it's almost as if the person was dead to us? Where do we need to only speak the word, to take the first step, for healing and restoration to begin? We may not be able to literally bring someone back from the grave like Jesus did, but the texts this week promise us in no uncertain terms that there is no such thing as too late, there is no such thing as no hope. All we need to do is speak the word.

March 16, 2008

Matthew 21:1-11; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Palm Sunday is an exercise in extreme irony. It always has been, even on the very first Palm Sunday. Jesus is riding in on the donkey with the crowds cheering him on. The adulation is bittersweet, of course, because Jesus knows what's coming. He knows that some of the very people who are waving palm branches today will be shouting "crucify him" on Friday. He knows his disciples who are now enjoying the attention like rock stars will take off as soon as the heat is on. He knows the physical suffering will be horrible, as will the feeling of abandonment by his friends and even by God. Perhaps worst of all is that Jesus knows his mother is going to have a front row seat for all of these things. Can you blame Jesus for not really enjoying the moment?

But the contrast of joy and pain is much bigger than simply the experiences of one man, of course. Everything Jesus says, does, and experiences always has a larger meaning. What Jesus experiences during Holy Week is symbolic of the eternal tension between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Man. As the representative of God's Kingdom, Jesus speaks on behalf of those who are excluded by human society: the poor, the oppressed, the outcasts, religious and ethnic minorities, etc. And on this particular Sunday he rides in to Jerusalem, the judgment seat of power, as the representative of those groups so that the powerful can do what they've always done to those who aren't able to fully participate in the life of the society: they use, abuse, and ultimately discard him.

Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical, "Jesus Christ Superstar", begins on Palm Sunday, and the musical contrast between the adulations of the crowd and the deep voiced, sinister plotting of Caiaphas and the Pharisees clearly illustrates the conflict we find in the biblical text: control. "Why are you wasting your breath moaning at the crowd?" Jesus asks the Pharisees. "Nothing can be done to stop the shouting. If every tongue was still, the noise would still continue. The rocks and stones themselves would start to sing." The people who controlled the religious establishment were losing control and they didn't like it. The people's access to God was not mediated by the authorities' interpretations of the rules. God was present with them in the flesh

in Jesus, and he told them that God's grace was for everyone.

Is it any wonder, then, that they killed him? Excuse me, we killed him? Jesus is a threat to every institution, every system, and every set of rules we've ever created. We put these institutions and systems and rules in the place of God, we worship them like they are God, and we react violently when God dares to call us out on our idolatry.

But that was all back then, right? We learned from our mistakes, and we don't ignore the voice of God in favor of rules, predictability, and control anymore, do we? The truth is that we're just like that cheering crowd on Palm Sunday that yelled "crucify!" on Good Friday. We, too, worship our systems and rules that keep everything in their proper place and we don't react very well when God calls us to end our idolatry. As we reflect on the suffering of Jesus this Holy Week, can we ask some difficult questions of ourselves? What are the roadblocks we've put up between ourselves and God. How have we conditioned ourselves to be deaf to God's Word to us? How do we participate in the crucifixion of the one who proclaims release to the captives and the recovery of sight to the blind? If we can identify those things and repent of them, then we will truly experience the joy of the Resurrection on Easter morning.

Please Note: Sermon Starters is now an exclusively online feature. Sermon Starters for the Easter season (March 23-May 4) will be posted to www.circuitrider.com by March 12.



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