

The Needs of the Many

Genesis 3:20-24; Matthew 26:36-41

Today we're going to play a game. A game of cosmic 'what if.' First, let's get rid of the elephant. Yes, this sermon title is drawn directly from the Star Trek universe. Specifically, it references the Vulcan philosophy "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, or the one." So yes, there will be some Star Trek, and other science fiction/fantasy references, in this sermon, but not so obscure anyone will be left in the dark, I hope. Let us begin.

In the passage that Jesse read from Genesis this morning we read about the expulsion from paradise, aka Eden. Some traditions call this the Fall of Man. The short version of the story is these first two humans made a mistake and ate of the tree of life, sometimes known as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This is the turning point in the story as God casts them out of Eden. All they needed to do in Eden was keep the place up and eat as they pleased. Now they need to work for their supper. God goes a step further and places an angel at Eden's entrance along with a flaming sentinel sword to keep anyone from returning to the tree of life. In Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country then Captain Spock kept an artistic rendering of this event in his quarters aboard the Enterprise-A. When asked about it the character states that it is a reminder that all things end. From the fictional Spock's perspective, he is referring to the ending of hostilities with one of the Federation's oldest enemies: the Klingon Empire.

So, here's the thing, there have been many times in my life that I've seriously sat down and tried to imagine what Eden must have been like. Was it like The Shire from The Lord of the Rings? I would be totally okay with that. Or maybe like New Eden on the planet Terralysium from Star Trek Discovery? Or, just a personal preference, like Caldos colony, which is based on Scotland, where The Next Generation's Dr. Crusher buried her grandmother or for that fact almost anywhere in the Scottish Highlands? While I was in the Boy Scouts, I have had the opportunity to see some truly amazing sights that we could only call "God's fingerprints." I have the distinct feeling that no matter how beautiful and majestic the images my mind can conjure up they are but a poor, pale shadow of the beauty that God's hands can bring forth.

It is true that the loss of paradise was an ending, but I also see it as a beginning. When something ends something new begins. This is where our game of ‘what if’ comes out play. What if Adam and Eve *hadn’t* eaten the forbidden fruit? They would have never gained the knowledge of good and evil; never known their own nakedness; never [chuckle] tried playing a *very* one-sided game of hid and seek with the Almighty Creator of the universe. And there never would have been a Cain and Able; never a Noah or a flood; never an Abraham or Isaac; never an Aaron or Moses; never a David and Goliath; never a Mary and Joseph; never a Jesus.

Now this is not new thought. Some of you who may have come from a Mormon background, or at least familiar with their theology, may be feeling that tickling familiarity of this line of thought. I did ask Jesse about quoting a passage from the Book of Mormon. In the Book of Mormon, the second book of Nephi, chapter 2:22-25 reads:

22 And now, behold, if Adam had not transgressed, he would not have fallen, but he would have remained in the Garden of Eden. And all things which were created must have remained in the same state in which they were after they were created; and they must have remained forever and had no end. 23 And they would have had no children; wherefore they would have remained in a state of innocence, having no joy, for they knew no misery; doing no good, for they knew no sin. 24 But behold, all things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things. 25 Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy.

This loss of something so majestic, so beautiful, so pure, so clean was not really a loss at all. Whether or not it was preordained, without Adam and Eve losing their comfortable existence there would have been no humanity. There would have been no need for a savior, and definitely not a people desperate, desiring, *yearning* to welcome him into the world. The needs of the many...

Which leads us to our second passage for today. That of this savior, Jesus, the Divine made flesh yet so woefully, wonderfully human. This passage in Matthew gives us a glimpse of this vulnerable redeemer. We read that Jesus is in The Garden at Gethsemane. Here we have Jesus who throws himself on the ground, prostrate, begging his father to “let this cup pass from me; yet *not what I*

*want but what you want.*” Jesus surrenders himself, his will, to his Father, to God, knowing it will result in his death. He knows that all too soon he will be falsely arrested, given a sham trial, and unjustly put to death.

Even pop culture acknowledges this vulnerability and courage. In J. Michael Straczynski’s *Babylon 5*, which, in that universe, is the fifth of five diplomatic space stations that actually *survived* construction, the third season includes a contingent of... monks. They came to this diplomatic port-of-call, to “learn all the names and faces of God” to quote Brother Theo. One of these monks, Brother Edward, is interviewing the Minbari ambassador, Delenn, when she decides to turn the tables on him. She asks him about the defining moment of *his* faith. “Not the history,” she clarifies, “not the doctrine.”

Brother Edward referenced this passage because, and he’s right, this was Jesus making a choice. Brother Edward tells her that he often wondered if he would have had the courage to remain in the Garden. Later in this passage Jesus scolds his disciples for sleeping on watch but he comments to them “See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.” He knew that “my betrayer is at hand.” His arrest and crucifixion were at near. In verse 42 Jesus prays again: “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” It was so very human, this desire not to die.

He knew what would happen. Again, our game of ‘what if.’ Jesus could have run away, could have gone into hiding until things settled down, could have created the first witness protection program. Here’s the Good News: he didn’t. He was reluctant but ultimately knew that his death and resurrection would pave the way for the salvation of us all.

Star Trek also mirrors this, particularly in the second Original Series film, *The Wrath of Khan*. Captain Spock, in a desperate attempt to save the Enterprise, uh the first one, not the Enterprise-A, seals himself inside an irradiated room in engineering. With no chance of survival, he sacrifices his life to bring the ship’s main systems on-line in time for them to warp out of danger. His final, I mean “final,” scene with Captain Kirk is one of the most poignant in all of Star Trek history. “The ship... out of danger?” “I have been... and always shall be... your friend.” The needs of the many...

Now I do want to pause for a moment in this passage from Matthew. Jesus has had his disciples stand watch while he prays in the garden and has had to wake them up, not just the one time in verse 40, but also later in verse 45. Setting aside the forbidden act of falling asleep on watch Jesus gives them a gentle rebuke in verse 41: “Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Why would I want to focus in on this verse? It’s because this is where we are at right now; we are in a time of trial and while our spirits are strong and willing, the flesh is weak.

We are in unprecedented times. A global pandemic, shelter in place and mask wearing requirements, wash your hands, wash your hands, wash your hands, and frayed tempers at the government for either not moving fast enough or going too far in social assistance. If you don’t know I work for the Jesus Center. Right now, we’ve been reduced to mail, emergency, I mean “emergency,” clothing, and meals to go. With EDD and other paperwork coming in, USPS having slowed down their operations due to budgetary considerations, nerves can get very frayed, and I am not ashamed to say it, but that includes me too.

But we are keeping ourselves at the Jesus Center and our participants as safe as we can. We require masks to come through the line for a meal, we ask that folks practice social distancing for all the available services, and also ask folks wash their hands before taking their meal.

What has shocked me is the news, that I really should stop reading but... The news has been reporting “everyday folks” who just seem to reject these notions for their own, and their communities, health and safety. Here’s another fun one; I was told two weeks ago that there is/was a movement in Butte County to encourage folks *not* to get tested for COVID-19 so our numbers don’t rise and get placed back on the watchlist. One, little late for that. Two, while I am human, not Vulcan, and yet the illogic of that whole concept makes my brain hurt. Here’s the most ironic of things: most of our mentally ill participants, most of our more obstinate participants, and most of our ‘I can’t believe you’re that intoxicated and yet still upright and walking in the meal line’ participants are following the rules; six foot social distancing, wearing masks, washing hands... need I say more?

The spirit is willing... What we have, here, this sacred space, and I don’t mean the chapel, I’m talking about the shared sacred space that extends to all of us

whether we're masked here at church, comfy at home in your favorite chair, or maybe, just maybe on a wee little vacation? Looking back on other pandemics we should be considering ourselves fortunate that we now exist in a time where we can hold sacred, yes digital, but still sacred, space with one another. This is a blessing, not a burden.

As Jesse mentioned a couple weeks ago some of our sibling churches who are not under the same restrictions tried re-opening under recommended guidelines. The result was that church still didn't feel the same. Yet this is an opportunity. A chance for us to stretch ourselves, to grow in new and, yes scary, but still exciting ways. Enhancing our digital footprint, finding new ways for mission and outreach, and maybe learning more about ourselves as a faith community.

Will we ever get back to "normal?" I don't know. I am not a prophet. My participants ask the same question. My answer is still the same: I don't know. What I do know is throughout the Bible, we've had two examples today, God's plan has always been bigger than the people in it. We know that Jesus asked twice if he had to do his part. We can guess that Adam and Eve were somewhere between "what just happened" to "curse you serpent!" In the end God's endgame will always be bigger and better than what we can see. If the needs of the many do outweigh the needs of the few, or the one, we just have to do as we are told. And maybe, just maybe, this is God's way of telling the Church, not just FCC-Chico, but the Church universal, you have been anchored behind your walls for far, far too long.