

Date: March 1, 2020

Scripture: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

Title: TRUSTING AND BELIEVING IN GOD

Welcome to the first Sunday in the season of Lent, the forty-six days from Ash Wednesday to silent Saturday, the day before Easter, the day before our celebration of the Resurrection. All around the world, people celebrate Lent as a time of reflection and preparation. We reflect on the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross, and we prepare ourselves to celebrate the awesome, life-changing joy of the resurrection.

Traditionally, Christians celebrate Lent by examining our hearts, repenting of our sins, and giving up something important to us as a way of identifying with Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf.

Obviously, not everyone likes the idea of self-examination and sacrifice.

Lent is an uncomfortable season in the church. It's supposed to be that way. For forty-six days, we are reminded of how much our sin separates us from God and how far God would go to heal that separation. So today's Bible passage on how sin entered the world is an appropriate way to start the season.

In Genesis 1-2, God creates the universe as a place of light and life, order and peace, fruitfulness and beauty. Then, on a remote planet in that universe, God placed humankind in a beautiful garden-world with all kinds of good food to eat. This was to be humanity's home, a place of safety and provision. Humankind would not have to wander like a hungry nomad searching for food or shelter, like a refugee. God intended for us to live in His presence and in His provision.

We read verses 16-17: And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die."

Let me stop right here and ask you a question. What if you had never heard of God before, had no concept of God, and someone read you Genesis 1 through Genesis 2:15, how would you describe the character of God? That's a really important question. Our beliefs about the character of God affect every part of our lives, from our sense of identity and purpose to how we handle suffering and death.

An interviewer once asked theologian R.C. Sproul what the greatest spiritual need of the world is. Sproul answered, "The greatest need in people's lives today is to discover the true identity of God . . . If believers really understood the character and the personality and the nature of God, it would revolutionize their lives." So what do we learn about "the character and the nature of God" from our lesson today?

First, the Creation story reveals to us the goodness of God. If I had never heard of God, had no concept of God, and someone presented me with the first 1½ chapters of Genesis, I would be overwhelmed by the goodness of God. Do you see God's goodness in creating this beautiful, orderly universe abounding with light and life? Do you see God's goodness in creating and blessing human beings with abundant food, fulfilling work and a personal relationship with God?

I'm reminded of the story of the young soldier who was overseas. He was writing his girlfriend. He wanted to send her a telegram because he thought that would make more of an impression. So he gave the telegraph operator a message to send. The message was this: "I love you. I love you. I love you. John."

The telegraph operator said, "Son, for the same amount of money you can send one more word."

So he amended his message and it read like this: "I love you. I love you. I love you. Cordially, John."

In creation God is saying, "I love you. I love you. I love you."

Many of us profess our love for God in return, "I love you, I love you, I love you," but when push comes to shove our devotion is more like "cordially" than it is love. In light of all our blessings we should be overwhelmed with the goodness of God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who stood up to the Nazis in World War II. In 1943, he was arrested by the Gestapo and imprisoned, then moved to a concentration camp, where he was executed. Not long before his execution, Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to a friend in which he said, "You must never doubt that I'm traveling with gratitude and cheerfulness along the road where I'm being led. My past life is brim-full of God's goodness, and my sins are covered by the forgiving love of Christ crucified." Here was a man facing certain execution, but he was filled with gratitude and a consciousness of God's presence. He trusted in the goodness of God.

Adam and Eve's sin in the Garden, began when they doubted God's character. With just one question and one challenge, the serpent was able to plant doubts in Eve's mind about the goodness of God. "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" the serpent asked Eve.

Eve answered, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

And immediately the serpent saw his opening: "You will not certainly die," said the serpent, contradicting God. "For God knows that when you eat fruit from that tree your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

The serpent planted the belief, in this first couple's mind, of an unjust God. He's suggesting God owes you happiness. God owes you power. God owes you an explanation for your every "Why?"

Adam and Eve momentarily lost sight of all the beauty and bounty that God had bestowed upon them. Instead they became fixated on the one thing God had denied them. And they began to justify both their sin and their self-centeredness. They lost sight of the goodness and holiness of God. And we do the same thing when we focus on the things we are denied, rather than the many ways in which God has blessed us.

Understanding the goodness of God, makes the difference between believing in God and trusting in God. I suspect all of us believe in God. The problem is that many of us really don't trust God. What's the difference? Trust means giving up control of your life to God. Trust means obeying God's limits, even when you don't understand them. Trust means knowing that God doesn't owe you an explanation.

If God says "Don't eat from that tree," then don't eat from it. When God withholds some blessing or allows some suffering or does not answer a desperate prayer in the way you want it answered, can you accept that situation with gratitude and cheerfulness? Trusting God means continuing to praise what you do know about God instead of questioning what you don't know about God.

On Nov. 21, 1990, Bill Irwin became the first blind person to hike the entire Appalachian Trail, a rugged wilderness trail that stretches more than 2,100 miles from Springer Mountain, Georgia to Mt. Katahdin, Maine. Irwin didn't use maps or compasses or any technology to find his way. He counted on his guide dog, Orient, to take him over hills and into ravines and across rivers.

Bill Irwin had been an angry, driven man with a drinking problem, four failed marriages, and battling depression when he began losing his eyesight. A few years later, Bill became a Christian while attending an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting with his son. His depression lifted, his drinking ended, as Bill experienced the hope and joy of salvation. In gratitude, he prayed, "Lord, I'm so grateful for all You've given me and all You've done for me. If there's ever anything I can do as a way of saying thanks to You, I want You to know I'll do it, whatever it is."

Not long after that, Bill felt God calling him to hike the Appalachian Trail. Bill wasn't an outdoorsman. He didn't care for hiking or camping. He was out-of-shape and not very athletic. And he was completely blind by now. Why in the world would he take on something so risky? To anyone who asked him for an explanation, Bill said simply that God had told him to. Bill would write later about the hike, "The first clear-eyed

thing I had ever done, was as a blind man,” he wrote, “when I asked God to take charge of my life.”

For Mr. Irwin, who died March 1, 2014 at age 73, the hike was an act of salvation. And whenever he got the opportunity, he quoted the first verse he learned as a new Christian, from Second Corinthians 5:7: “For we walk by faith, not by sight.” Think how much comfort this blind man took from that verse: “For we walk by faith, not by sight.”

If you really understood the goodness of God, would you trust Him with your life? Would it change your priorities or your attitudes? How could God use you if you handed over control of your life to Him? This whole Lenten season is set aside for reflecting on the sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf. If you were being honest with yourself, are you stuck in the believing stage, or have you moved on to trusting God? Can we really look at the symbols of the Lenten season, the whip, the nails, the crown of thorns and the cross, and still question the goodness of God?

The Creation story reveals to us the goodness of God. Adam and Eve’s sin in the Garden began when they doubted God’s character, God’s goodness. Understanding the goodness of God, makes the difference between believing in God and trusting in God. Do you trust God? Do you trust God enough to give your life to God? Please Trust, Believe, and have an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.