

# Echoes from the Pulpit

Midweek Lent Sermons, 2012

## *Stunning Sins and Vast Forgivenesses*

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**I**ntroduction from Pastor Fryer: The origin of this Lent series on sin was the annual “St. Gregory of Nazianzus Retreat” Carol and I attended this past February 2012. Old and new friends gather each year for this retreat. We sing the prayer offices – Matins, Vespers, and Compline – and celebrate the Holy Communion each day. Otherwise the retreat is unstructured. Mostly we sit around and discuss theology, ministry, and catch up on how things are going with one another.

One of the assigned Bible readings for Vespers during the retreat was the story of Jacob deceiving his old father, Isaac. “This is appalling,” I thought to myself as I sat and listened to the story. “This is awful deception and manipulation of the old man!” Quickly, then, other Bible stories of sin came to my mind. The story of Jacob deceiving his father is the third of the stories in this series I now present to you.

But with the stories of sin, there are also stories of forgiveness. There is an important lesson here: Sin is never the end of the story. At first blush, sin looks like victory for Satan. But it does not turn out that way. Sin, then, proves to be a poor investment, unworthy of anyone who bears the name of Christ. Our Triune God will not let sin stand. He offers forgiveness. He has his goal – his final kingdom of love – and he will not let sin undo it all. So, with each of the stories of sin I have tried also to speak of divine forgiveness and getting back on track.

There are more stories of sin in the Bible than I had time for in this year’s Lent series. For example, one of our Easter season stories speaks of the harmony, charity, and goodwill within the early Christian church in Jerusalem. “Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common.” (Acts 4:32, RSV) But there is a shadow side to this story. It is the sin of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. This story does not appear in our three-year lectionary, as far as I can recall.

But maybe next Lent, I will continue the series “Stunning Sins and Vast Forgivenesses” with this sad story and some other stories of sin in the Bible.

Meanwhile, I have been encouraged to collect these recent midweek Lent sermons and to share them with the whole congregation. Here they are. May God use them as building blocks for his kingdom.

Yours in Christ,  
*Gregory Fryer*  
Pastor Gregory P. Fryer

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## The Fall of Adam and Eve

Genesis 3:1-24

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text refers to what I take to be the cruelest cut flung by Satan that day -- his deception about wisdom in our world:

“And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired *to make one wise*, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. (Genesis 3:6, KJV)

What Adam and Eve did was not wise, but rather the abandonment of wisdom. The theme of this sermon, then, can be quickly stated: the true path of wisdom for us is to cling to God’s Word.

Council President Thomas Wicks happened recently to send me a line from Luther he found very moving. It is a positive statement about God’s Word:

...when we seriously ponder the Word, hear it, and put it to use, such is its power that it never departs without fruit. It always awakens new understanding, new pleasure, and a new spirit of devotion, and it constantly cleanses the heart and its meditations.<sup>1</sup> (*Large Catechism*, The Third Commandment)

This is a lovely statement of the *benefits* of God’s Word. If we cling to the Word, it will transform our hearts, give us new pleasures, and make us better people.

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<sup>1</sup>Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran church* (379). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

It so happens that in that same discussion, Luther also has a warning about the *dangers* of departing from God's Word:

Therefore you must continually keep God's Word in your heart, on your lips, and in your ears. For where the heart stands idle and the Word is not heard, the devil breaks in and does his damage before we realize it. (Ibid.)

And so now we come to the role of the devil in this evening's story. The devilish method of the serpent in the story of the Fall seems simply to be this: to lure Adam and Eve away from God's Word.

## COMPARING THE SINS OF ADAM AND EVE

Comparing the sins of Adam and Eve, the sin of Adam seems akin to that of Eve, but then hastens downward toward the sleazy kind of sin by which Adam flings Eve to the wolves in a futile attempt to save himself. And so Adam complains about Eve and about God himself:

<sup>12</sup>And the man said, *The woman* whom *thou* gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. (Genesis 3:12, KJV)

A charitable interpretation of Adam's first sin - his eating of the fruit of the tree - is that he loved his wife, meant to share her fate, and to go where she goes. So if she eats of the forbidden fruit, then he means to also. But the Bible doesn't actually say that he ate of the tree out of love of his wife, and even if he did, there is a lesson to be learned here: Adam loved his wife less, because he did not love the Lord more! That is, if Adam had clung to the Lord's Word forbidding that tree, then Adam would have remained an innocent and strong force in her life. He could have gently counseled her against eating of the tree. Aye, and he would have had a leg to stand on in interceding for her with the Lord, as Abraham and Moses later interceded on behalf of God's people. And if the Lord would not be persuaded away from punishing Eve, so that she had to endure some measure of rebuke, still, she would have had her husband to comfort and protect her, to cheer her up, and to walk with her until the Lord's time of chastisement had passed and all was well again. But as it is, Adam departed from the Word of the Lord too, thereby making himself a poor advocate for his wife.

## THIS SIN IS A MYSTERY

It is a mystery to me why Adam and Eve fell into sin. Eve was the first to disobey the Lord, but her sin seems innocent and childlike. She did not murder anyone, she did not abuse children or steal money from poor, elderly folk. She sinned, yes, but it is the kind of sin many good-hearted people could fall into: She was beguiled by the serpent into thinking that there was *a better way in life* than the ways of the Lord.

And herein there is a lesson for us. *Sin* does not always appear *sinful* to us. In fact, if the devil is clever enough, sin will appear quite sane to us, perhaps even virtuous. We should take quite seriously, I believe, that the devil is subtle, beguiling, and probably a lot smarter than we are.

## THE DEVIL'S CLEVERNESS

Our Prayer of the Day for this week warns of the devil's power in human life, even to this very day:

Lord God, our strength, the battle of good and evil rages within and around us, and our ancient foe tempts us with his deceits and empty promises. Keep us steadfast in your Word and, when we fall, raise us again and restore us through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

That phrase there -- the battle of good and evil "rages within and around us" -- has an air of violence about it. It is akin to the saying of St. Peter -- a verse that is often read aloud in Compline, at the end of the day:

<sup>8</sup>Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour. (1 Peter 5:8, RSV)

This pictures the devil as ripping and roaring and slashing and clobbering us to death. But often the ways of the devil are more gentle, but just as dangerous.

Strengths and weakness are often related to one another. That is an idea I learned from Pastor David Lotz and I think it is true. An inclination to being judgmental toward others, for example, is sometimes the shadow-side of something good: a yearning for a more perfect world -- a yearning, alas, that is often disappointed and tends to frustrate us. And so it is with the devil in his attacks up on us: he has a feel for human weakness, but it is a weakness that is the shadow-side of something good: I mean, our human ability to be moved by words. We are vulnerable to words. A word from my beloved can mean more to me than money or bullets. The good Lord brings all of his creatures into being by talking about them: Let there be light, let there be fish in the sea and birds in the air, and so on. But to *one* of his creatures does the Lord actually speak: he speaks to us. And if we should take flight as in Star Trek someday and visit distant worlds and new civilizations, if we find creatures there to whom God speaks, then we will be glad to say that we have found some more humans out there in space, for that is what it means to be a "human." God not only speaks about us, but to us. We are the kinds of people who can be spoken to.

So we can be spoken to. And the devil joins right in. He speaks to us! Indeed he does. He roars sometimes, but he whispers more often. He whispers in the ear, "Surely you will not die if you depart from the Word of God." But, then, the devil is a born

liar, and we do ourselves harm in listening to him. He uses words to attack the Word, as Luther put it.

## VAST FORGIVENESS

So far I have been talking about the sin of Adam and Eve. Let me speak now about their forgiveness. It is a forgiveness that extends to you and me.

The first element of their forgiveness is the simple fact that the Lord condemns the serpent, but not Adam and Eve:

...upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life.

I am glad of this. I hate to think of human beings slithering around on the ground like snakes. I like us walking upright, with our faces seeing the sunshine. I'm glad we don't have to slither.

Second, the Lord permitted Adam and Eve to *hear* the condemnation of Satan. That is crucial because it means that Adam and Eve and all their descendants to this present day need not be forlorn, as if for us and our kind there is no hope. For the wonderful thing about the condemnation of Satan is that it speaks of a Descendant of Adam and Eve who will conquer Satan. One of their seed will triumph over the old Enemy. And if Satan is conquered, then all is well. I am speaking of the Gospel. Adam and Eve had the Gospel preached to them. They were thrust out of the Garden, and we all live east of Eden now, in a world in which the devil still prowls around like a hungry lion seeking whom he can devour. But with the Lord's ancient condemnation of the devil, Gospel hope was created on earth. Adam and Eve were the first to hear something true and important: things are going to get better.

And the third thing about their forgiveness is that we have met this long-promised Descendent of Adam and Eve who will crush the head of the serpent. He is our Lord Jesus. In the desert he did battle with the devil, when that ancient serpent whispered all kinds of sweet nothings in his ear -- things about turning stones into bread and about the kingdoms of the world and the glory thereof. But Jesus did not follow the pattern of Adam and Eve. He refused the sweet temptations in precisely the manner Adam and Eve should have refused: by answered the devil, "But thus saith the Lord..."

Then in the Garden of Gethsemane, the devil launched a more furious attack, so dismaying and frightening Jesus with the prospect of the cross that Jesus fell into an agony of spirit. Yes, he fell into agony of spirit, yet he did not fall into sin. He defeated the devil in that Garden.

And finally, on the cross, the devil unleashed his full power and hatred, as if desperate to break Jesus while he could, before it was too late. He had broken many a man before, many a woman. In fact, he had broken them all! But not this Seed of Adam and Eve. Not our Savior Jesus. He is our great Pattern of the possibility of resisting Satan. Let us follow his pattern, keeping our eyes upon him and our ears always open to the Word of God. That is the truth path of wisdom in this world,

following on behind our Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

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## Cain and Abel

Genesis 4:1-16

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>10</sup>And [the LORD] said [to Cain], What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. (Genesis 4:10, KJV)

The original sin of our ancestors, Adam and Eve, unleashed a sea of misery on earth. Step by step, the Bible records the sin and the suffering. First, Adam and Eve try to hide from the Lord. They hide, with the result that for the first time on earth is heard that soul-searching question of our Creator toward his straying human creatures: "Where are you?"

<sup>8</sup>And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden. <sup>9</sup>And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou? (Genesis 3:8-9, KJV)

Futile it was to hide from the Lord, for there is no outrunning him:

<sup>7</sup>Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? <sup>8</sup>If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. <sup>9</sup>If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; <sup>10</sup>Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. (Psalm 139:7-11, KJV)

Indeed, doubly futile is it to try to hide from the Lord, for not only can it *not be done*, but also, we should not *want* it to be done, for then we are lost. In the end, the whole key to our destiny is that we not flee from the Lord, but seek after him and draw near to him:

<sup>6</sup>Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; <sup>7</sup>let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. (Isaiah 55:6-7, RSV)

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:16, RSV)

<sup>8</sup>Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. (James 4:8, NRSV)

But they did this thing: they hid from the Lord. Next, when the LORD questioned them about eating from the tree, Adam threw his wife under the bus by suggesting that she was the one to blame for his sin. How much sorrow there is on earth from husbands and wives betraying one another.

Then Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden and forced to live in a world east of Eden, where the ground is contrary, with thistles and thorns and weeds, and where we have to make our living by the sweat of our brow.

And now this: Cain murders his brother, Abel. How quickly things have moved from eating of a forbidden tree to heartless murder.

## THE CRUSHER

Last week we took some comfort in the promise made to Adam and Eve that though they had sinned, still one of their descendants would defeat Satan and set things back on track. The LORD condemns the devil and promises One who will bruise the head of the serpent:

<sup>15</sup>And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.  
(Genesis 3:15, KJV)

Martin Luther observed that it would be entirely natural for Eve to hope that her first born son would be this promised one -- the one who could get things back on track with the Lord. Luther uses a fun word to make his point. He speaks the "Crusher," with a capital "C":

When Eve had given birth to her first-born son, she hoped that she already had that Crusher.

But, alas, that did not work out, now did it? For Eve's first-born son turned out not to be the Crusher, but a murderer! Cain murdered his brother, Abel.

## WRATH

He had been warned against it. The LORD himself had warned Cain about the power of wrath:

<sup>4</sup>... And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, <sup>5</sup> but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. <sup>6</sup> The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your

countenance fallen? <sup>7</sup> If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.” (Genesis 4:4-7, RSV)

This is a saying of entire honesty. It is both law and gospel, each intensely worded. The law is that “sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you.” And the gospel is “but you must master it.” Perhaps this is more gospel than we want. I hope you are a peaceful-minded people never afire with anger. But if you should ever fall into anger, so that you are ablaze with wrath, then remember this saying of our Lord, “but you must master it.” The reason this is “gospel” is that it means you that *can* master your anger. Our God has not so abandoned the human race that we have become monsters with no ability to master our emotions. No, the death and resurrection of Jesus is the sure sign that the Blessed Trinity has not given up on us. We retain the freedom to master our anger. If we will, we can calm ourselves down. We do not need to hit with wicked fist. We do not need to slash and burn our opponent. We do not need to walk in the path of Cain of old.

This is much emphasized in the New Testament. Both Jesus and St. Paul urge us to master our anger. And so it is that early on in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus asks for purity of heart that surrenders anger:

<sup>21</sup>“You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.’ <sup>22</sup>But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire. <sup>23</sup>So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, <sup>24</sup>leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:21-24, RSV)

Likewise with St. Paul. He knows that we are human beings subject to getting angry. But he asks us to master that anger:

<sup>26</sup>Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath:  
<sup>27</sup>Neither give place to the devil... <sup>31</sup>Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice:  
<sup>32</sup>And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you. (Ephesians 4:26-27, 31-32, KJV)

Though Cain had a good Preacher appealing to him to calm his wrath -- that is, though the LORD himself exhorted Cain toward peace -- Cain refused, to the heartbreak of his mother and father and to the death of his own brother. The LORD God had alerted Cain that he was on the verge of great wickedness. “Sin lieth at the door, Cain. Sin is crouching, hungry to get you. You can still master him.” But Cain rejected the pleading of God. When he got his brother alone in the open country, Cain

rose up against Abel his brother and slew him. The spilt blood of Abel, then, cried to heaven against Cain. And in virtue of that crying blood, Cain was punished, almost beyond his ability to bear it.

## **BUT NOT THE BLOOD OF CALVARY**

But, as a kind of foretaste of the Gospel to come, mercy was shown to this murderer, Cain. When the man was close to despair, the Lord showed mercy on him:

<sup>13</sup>And Cain said unto the LORD, My punishment is greater than I can bear.  
(Genesis 4:13, KJV)

Murder is a great sin. The mind reels to think of things worse than murder. The murderer trifles with God's own creation. Life belongs to God. It is precious in his sight. But the murderer casts aside the claims of the Creator and does harm that goes beyond his undoing, for the life is gone and the murderer cannot restore it.

But for all that, the Lord showed mercy on Cain. The Lord protects Cain with a mark:

And the LORD set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.  
(Genesis 4:15, KJV)

Poor Abel's spilt blood cried out to heaven against Cain, yet the Lord did not utterly destroy Cain. This is an anticipation of that precious blood splattered on the Cross -- a blood that cries out not for human destruction, but for our salvation.

The blood spilt and soaking into the ground of Calvary does not condemn us. That divine blood that fell and stained the cross and the ground does not cry out against us.

We sang of that mercy just a few minutes ago, in the hymn "Glory Be to Jesus" (LBW 95):

Abel's blood for vengeance  
Pleaded to the skies;  
But the blood of Jesus  
For our pardon cries.

The New Testament puts the point like this:

...to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling,  
that speaketh better things than that of Abel. (Hebrews 12:24, KJV)

Indeed it does speak of "better things." It speaks of the salvation of the sinner on account of the body and blood of our Lord Jesus given for us.

## AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?

Let me end by lingering a bit with Cain's cold-hearted question: Am I my brother's keeper? Yes, Cain, you are.

Brothers should not kill brothers. In the Civil War, brothers fought on opposite sides, and I suppose that if they ever faced one another on the battle field, they charged one another with conviction as they would with facing any other enemy.<sup>2</sup> In this sad world, brothers might end up facing brothers in street gangs. But it is a hard thing to think about. What a rendering of the bonds of childhood! This brother, this sister you grew up with: Have things really reached a state where you would contemplate killing that one?

And who is my brother? Who is my sister? It is a beautiful thing, you know, that the Bible begins with the story of Adam and Eve, for one implication of that story is that we are all kin. We all spring for the same mother and father. We share a common humanity, and John Donne's saying remains true, "Any man's death diminishes me."

Finally, tremble not only before murder of the body, but also before murder of the soul. Beware of soul-murderer. Do not be the one to lead others astray. Do not lead them to the red-light district, not to the drug dealer, not to so many ways in which we can degrade one another. Why? Because our brother is one for whom our Lord died and for whom he lives again. I mean Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

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## Jacob Deceives His Poor Old Father

Genesis 27:1-41

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>22</sup>So Jacob went near to Isaac his father, who felt him and said, "The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau." <sup>23</sup>And he did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau's hands; so he blessed him. <sup>24</sup>He said, "Are you really my son Esau?" He answered, "I am." (Genesis 27:22-24, RSV)

Now, I know that fathers are often nothing special in this world -- unimpressive and hard to be proud of. Still, you would think old Isaac would deserve better than this. His son, his very own son, deceives him. Yes, and deceives him in an important matter: a father's blessing on a son. In those ancient Biblical days, it was thought that once a blessing was spoken, it could not be taken back. So, Jacob had deceived his

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<sup>2</sup> An observation made by Charles Spurgeon, preaching in England at the time of our Civil War and quite distressed at the idea of brothers killing brothers.

father in way that could not be fixed. Jacob had gotten what he wanted, only he had gotten it in an unfair way.

Again, you would have thought the old man deserved better than this. After all, even unimpressive fathers have often tried to do good in the lives of their children. Back when they were young, Isaac might have walked many an hour around the house, for example, carrying his baby sons, trying to calm them and let them fall asleep, trying to instill in them from the beginning of life a fundamental conviction that things are okay, that life is not out of control, that they had a father to take care of them. Isaac might have prayed for them, read them stories at bedtime, taught them what he happened to know, what life had taught him. As they grew and became rambunctious, he might have tried to caution them to be careful and put Band-Aids on them when they fell. And as they grew older still, smoldering with testosterone and drawn toward sin, the old man might have lost many an hour of sleep at night praying and fretting for his sons. He deserved better. That's what I think.

## **THIS STORY IS A TANGLED MESS**

Now, this story is a tangled mess. For one thing, who would you say is the hero of the story? At first glance, your heart probably goes out to Isaac, the father, and perhaps to Esau, who lost his blessing through his brother's deceit. But I am not absolutely sure the Bible sees it that way. And I am quite sure that Martin Luther does not see it that way. Luther wrote an awful lot about this story, and I haven't managed to read it all, but what I have read leads me to think that Luther discounts Isaac as a weak man and probably unfaithful to the Lord as well. Luther doesn't much care for Esau either, for reasons I mean to soon tell you about. If there is a hero in the story, I think Luther would point to Rebekah as that good one, which at first seems entirely strange. But adding it all up, none of the characters in this story is especially saintly. This, however, does not discourage Luther. In fact, he rather delights to think that the great patriarchs of our faith were flawed human beings like you and me.

## **WHY REBEKAH?**

Now, why in the world would Luther like Rebekah? She seems to be the great schemer in this story. It wasn't Jacob's idea to trick his blind father, but his mother's idea. And when Jacob hesitated for fear that he would be discovered and cursed by his father, Rebekah urges him onwards:

<sup>13</sup>His mother said to him, "Upon *me* be your curse, my son; only obey my word, and go..." (Genesis 27:13, RSV)

As it turns out, Rebekah does suffer a curse, enough to nearly break her mother's heart: At the end of this story, Esau is so filled with rage toward his brother that he swears he will kill him. Rebekah believes he will, and so she sends her beloved son, Jacob, away. This was not a world of telephones or email or Skype. She lost her son

for the next twenty years. But for all that, if she had it to do all over again, she probably would have done it again. Faith in the Lord moved her to it.

## **THE PARENTS HAD FAVORITES**

Isaac and Rebekah had favorites. Isaac liked his outdoorsman son, Esau. Rebekah preferred her quieter, stay-at-home son, Jacob:

<sup>27</sup>When the boys grew up, Esau was a skilful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. <sup>28</sup>Isaac loved Esau, because he ate of his game; but Rebekah loved Jacob. (Genesis 25:19-28, RSV)

So, these two boys, twins, sons of the same mother and father, were different from the beginning. But for Luther, it was not the difference in temperament between the two boys that led Rebekah to manipulate the tricking of her old husband, Isaac. The difference that mattered was not an emotional preference, but faithfulness to the word of God.

For you see, Rebekah had waited long and sorrowfully to have a son. She was barren for such a long time she must have supposed she was running out of time. We do not know her age, but if she was of the same generation as her husband, Isaac, then she was getting older, for Isaac was sixty years old when his sons were born.

By the time of this evening's story, many years have passed. But one thing from those earlier days seems to have remained in Rebekah's mind: The Lord who had granted her children in old age had also made a promise concerning those children. He had promised that "the elder shall serve the younger":

<sup>23</sup>And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples, born of you, shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." (Genesis 25:23, RSV)

That meant that Esau should serve Jacob. They were twins, but Esau had been born first. By the law of primogeniture common in the ancient world, Jacob should have served Esau. But by the Lord's reckoning, things were to be reversed. Esau should serve Jacob, and Rebekah bears this in mind.

## **ESAU'S BIRTHRIGHT**

Luther gets especially annoyed with Esau when it comes to the matter of his birthright. You might recall that Esau sold his birthright to his brother, Jacob, for a supper of stew:

<sup>34</sup>Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright. (Genesis 25:34, RSV)

Luther views this as sheer cynicism on Esau's part. Esau doesn't sell his birthright to Jacob because Esau wants to be obedient to the Lord's rule that he should serve his brother. No, he sells it simply because he is hungry. Luther even suggests that Esau thought he was tricking Jacob: he was so confident in the universal agreement on primogeniture that he figured he *could not* sell his birthright, that no one would recognize such a transaction, and therefore he would get a free supper of soup in the process.

## **ISAAC**

As for Isaac, either he is so incompetent that in thirty-some years of marriage he had not learned from his wife what the Lord had said about Esau serving Jacob, or, worse, he had learned that truth, but was rebelling against it.

One way or the other, Rebekah would not let his blessing go to the wrong child, and she took her extraordinary steps to make sure her family cohered with the word of the Lord.

## **TWO LESSONS**

So, Luther and perhaps the Bible too take a fairly calm stance toward the manipulations of Rebekah and Jacob. Still, there is something unsatisfying about this story. Maybe we can draw some lessons from it which I think fit the rest of the Bible.

First, it would have been better if this family had been open and honest with one another. I mean, if Rebekah overheard her husband planning to give his blessing to Esau, she could gone to him privately and said, "Dear husband, have you forgotten the word of our Lord. We cannot do what you propose. I appeal to you, then, forsake this plan of yours."

And if she had failed in thirty-some years of marriage to tell her husband about the word of the Lord, well, sooner late, than never at all. It was time to start talking.

Likewise, Isaac seems to have made his plan to bless Esau independently of his wife. She would not have known except that she happened to overhear the conversation. Or was she spying on her husband? Either way, it would have been better if they had worked at better communication in the family.

## **TWO WRONGS DO NOT MAKE A RIGHT**

This is a family in which no one seems content to "be still, and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10, RSV) This is a family in which no one is willing to rest content with godliness and to entrust salvation to the Lord. They were unwilling to do what Moses would later counsel the people to do when they faced the Sea with Pharaoh and his horsemen bearing down on them:

<sup>13</sup>And Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will shew to you to day: for the

Egyptians whom ye have seen to day, ye shall see them again no more for ever. <sup>14</sup>The LORD shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace. (Exodus 14:9-14, KJV)

Rebekah and Jacob seemed to think that the Lord's plan of salvation was up to them and that therefore all paths were authorized to them, including the path of deception. To such thinking the old rule still holds: Two wrongs do not make a right. Do not march into sin for the sake of saving the world, for God is the one who saves the world, not us.

## **OLDER BROTHERS**

I close with this simple thought: older brothers are not so bad. Esau was displaced by Jacob, the older brother by the younger brother. Still, older brothers are not so bad. After all, you and I have an older Brother. He is Jesus Christ our Lord. *To* him have great blessings been granted, but *through* him great blessing are granted to you and me too, through the grace and merits of our older Brother Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

# Joseph and His Brothers

Genesis 37:1-35

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>32</sup>And [the brothers of Joseph] sent the coat of many colours, and they brought it to their father; and said, This have we found: know now whether it be thy son's coat or no. <sup>33</sup>And he knew it, and said, It is my son's coat; an evil beast hath devoured him; Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces. <sup>34</sup>And Jacob rent his clothes... (Genesis 37:32-34, KJV)

This scene puts me in mind of the saying in the New Testament about the sword. When a disciple of Jesus proposes to defend Jesus by hacking with a sword, Jesus commands him to put away that sword:

<sup>48</sup>Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I shall kiss is the man; seize him." <sup>49</sup>And he came up to Jesus at once and said, "Hail, Master!" And he kissed him. <sup>50</sup>Jesus said to him, "Friend, why are you here?" Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him. <sup>51</sup>And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest, and cut off his ear. <sup>52</sup>Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place; *for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.* (Matthew 26:48-52, RSV)

Likewise we could say about Jacob, those who prosper by deceit shall also suffer by deceit. And so it was that last Wednesday we read how Jacob deceived his poor blind father, Isaac, and won the old man's blessing by guile. Now, Jacob himself is getting older and he suffers heartache even more extreme than Isaac did, again through guile.

Joseph's brothers have done the lad in. Their bitterness toward Joseph is so strong that they seem unable to even acknowledge that he is their brother: "This have we found: know now whether it be *thy son's* coat or no." "Thy son's coat," not "we fear that this is the coat of our brother," but "thy son," as if he were a stranger to them. Well, indeed, they made him a stranger. They had treated him more cruelly than they would have treated a stranger or a dog.

## NAIVETÉ

Perhaps we should learn a lesson about naiveté from this story. By no means do I want to defend these older brothers, for what they did was wicked and astonishing in its hardheartedness. Still, it seems to me that both old Jacob and his son Joseph were pretty naïve here -- Jacob in his obvious preference for Joseph, and Joseph in his witless reporting of his dreams. The brothers were already resentful of Joseph because their father loved him most, and that was easy to see. They had only to look at

Joseph's many-colored coat to see their father's preference. Those colors seem to have made the brother's see red. But then Joseph made things worse by blissfully relating his dreams in which his brothers and even his father bow down to him. His brothers do not like this. These visions of lordship irritate them and tempt them to the wickedness to which they eventually succumb.

Back in the days when I was considering the call to serve as pastor of this congregation, the only hesitancy Carol and I felt about the matter was whether the move to the city would be good for our boys, who were quite young then. We wondered whether they would be safe. We wondered whether they would be good. We remember very well the thoughts of our member Carlynn Matern back then. Carlynn suggested that there is a distinction between "innocence" versus "naiveté," such that it was unlikely that our boys would grow up naïve in the big city, yet they could grow up "innocent."

Such a distinction applies to Joseph. He did grow up innocent. In fact, he seems to have been a virtuous and innocent man his entire life long. I can recall no story of sin in Joseph. He went through many adventures and many troubles, but I do not recall any sin in him. But as for naiveté, well, Joseph was pretty naïve as a young man. His mind and his heart seemed not to be open to the turmoil he could place in the heart of others by his conduct, innocent though his conduct might be.

Put more positively, I should think that the path of love would open us up to the impact of things on other folks. We know the impact of things on *ourselves*. Love should lead us to wonder and to imagine the impact of our conduct on other people too.

## JACOB

Be that as it may, Joseph's brothers yielded to their resentment of him and tossed him aside. He ended up being sold into slavery -- a fate that never bodes well for the slave. The story is somewhat unclear as to whether they intended that Joseph should be swept away as a slave. I mean, it appears that it was some Midianite merchantmen who found Joseph in the pit and sold him into slavery to a passing caravan. I am not quite sure how to interpret the pronoun "they" in that text:

<sup>28</sup>Then there passed by Midianites merchantmen; and *they* drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmeelites for twenty pieces of silver: (Genesis 37:28, KJV)

Whether it was the brothers who sold him or the Midianites who did so, it was still the case the brothers were so hostile toward their brother that they openly discussed murdering him. Furthermore, once he was sold into slavery, the brothers did not hasten after him to redeem him, but rather abandoned him and turned for home, with their deceit about a wild animal slaying their brother.

When they told this lie to Jacob, it struck him hard. He rent his garments, as he imagined the wild animal rending his son. He grieved and would not be comforted.

For in the supposed death of Joseph, Jacob had been deprived of his chief comfort in old age. Life had not been easy for Jacob after last week's story about the deceiving of his father, Isaac. Jacob had to flee his home. He then tried to marry his beloved Rachel, but was tricked by her father into working fourteen years before he could marry her. Then he had to live through the anxiety of returning home and trying to win reconciliation with his brother, Esau. By the time of this evening's story, Jacob has lived through the sorrow of the death of Rachel, and the horror of the rape of his daughter Dinah (Genesis 34). In the very next chapter from this evening's story, we read of the whoring and incest of his son Judah with his daughter-in-law, Tamar. (Genesis 38) These were not good days for old Jacob. It was a bad time in the old man's life to be deprived of his son Joseph.

## LUTHER AND KATY'S LOSS OF MAGDALENE

Indeed, there is never a good time to lose a child. Martin Luther and his wife Katy, for example, had six children all together, but lost two of them. One died in childbirth, which happened more often in those days than in ours. The other child, Magdalene, died at age thirteen and it about broke Luther's heart. In fact, Luther himself died a few years later. Let me tell you a little about the death of Magdalene, for it contains both strong elements of sorrow and faith -- elements we will find in the story of Joseph too.

Here is an account of the illness and death of young Magdalene:

When the illness of his daughter became graver he [Martin Luther] said, "I love her very much. But if it is thy will to take her, dear God, I shall be glad to know that she is with thee."

Afterward he said to his daughter, who was lying in bed, "Dear Magdalene, my little daughter, you would be glad to stay here with me, your father. Are you also glad to go to your Father in heaven?"

The sick girl replied, "Yes, dear Father, as God wills."  
The father said, "You dear little girl!"<sup>3</sup>

On 20 September 1542 she died in his arms. Katy stood somewhat aside because of her grief...As they laid the body in the coffin, the father said that it was well with his beloved child. Then he was overcome with sobbing. But his hope did not let sorrow get the better of him. As they closed the coffin he said, "Close it! She will rise again at the last day."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Luther's *Table Talk*, LW 54, No. 5494: Illness of Luther's Daughter Becomes Graver, September, 1542.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther, Volume 3, The Preservation of the Church, 1532-1546*, translated by James L. Schaaf (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1993), page 237.

Luther's confidence here in the resurrection of his daughter Magdalene has an anticipation in the story of Joseph and his father. It is a kind of foretaste of the resurrection: in the end, Joseph is not dead! He lives, and the father's deep sorrow is changed into deep joy. Luther puts this happy outcome this way:

...there follows the wonderful and peaceful outcome by which his great and unexpected grief is changed into the greatest unexpected joy. For Joseph, whose destruction the father had mourned, is recalled from darkness to light, from death to life, after being preserved by God and rewarded with great honor and dignity by the king of Egypt after he himself had also emerged from many difficulties.

This leads me to my first lesson to be learned from this story: Never despair. Never abandon hope. Never think happiness is lost to you and that your heart will never be light again. Both Jacob and Joseph were innocent sufferers in this evening's story. Yet they did not remain sufferers forever. For the Lord still reigned, and all these things were in his hands. The Lord restored joy to the old father and son again. Luther gives much credit to the sad old man that he never gave up, and never lost his faith, even when he believed he had lost his son:

...first of all consider the wonderful example of God's government in Jacob, namely, how God brings His saints down to hell and leads them back again, comforts and saddens them, that we may become accustomed to trust His Word alone and cling to it. For the affairs of the godly must be brought to the point that they feel nothing, understand nothing else, and see nothing on which to rely, especially in death, but the Word.

## **JOSEPH FORGIVES HIS BROTHERS**

My second lesson has to do with the ability of God to bring good from out of bad, including good from out of our sin. The story goes this way: Along the way to the happy outcome where Joseph is restored to his father, Jacob, Joseph forgave his brothers. The tables were turned. Joseph became governor of all Egypt, and his treacherous brothers end up in his hand. His brothers, naturally, fear that one day Joseph will take revenge on them. Then Joseph said this to his brothers:

<sup>19</sup>And Joseph said unto them, Fear not: for am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup>But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive. <sup>21</sup>Now therefore fear ye not: I will nourish you, and your little ones. And he comforted them, and spake kindly unto them. (Genesis 50:19-21, KJV)

There is an extraordinary generosity of spirit here in Joseph. And it contains within it a wonderful claim of faith: the sinner, of course, means his sin to be what it

is; but God is well able to take that sin and work good from it. So he did with the sin of the brothers of Joseph. So he can do with your sin, with mine.

Who knows what errors and sins we have committed this day? Who can keep count of it all? Who can even reliably recognize when we have gone wrong? Each of us at the end of the day has reason to approach the throne of grace and to beg for God's mercy and forgiveness for the deeds of our day. But there is even more. There is an additional blessing illustrated in the story of Joseph and his brothers: not only are we permitted to pray for God's forgiveness, but also we are permitted to pray for the reformation of our deeds, so that God converts them into good. That is what we can confidently pray at the end of the day. We can lay our heads down on the pillow and ask God to accept the deeds of our day, repair them, and use them as building blocks for his kingdom, the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

# David and Bathsheba

2 Samuel 11:1-27

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

These evening's story of King David, Bathsheba and her poor husband, Uriah, is a moral disaster. Such abuse and cruel manipulation of others might have been common for kings in those days, but it was unworthy of *any* of them. Especially it was unworthy of David! That man had been anointed with the Holy Spirit when he was but a boy. He had been protected by the Lord against lion, bear, Goliath, and the wrath of King Saul and all his armies. Finally, the Lord had entrusted the kingship of the people to David. What had the Lord ever done to David that David should so callously disregard the ways of the Lord?

Yet David did his wicked deeds and went merrily on his way. He committed adultery, sleeping with another man's wife. He abused that wife by summoning her in the first place and then taking her. He murdered Uriah. I think that is the right way to put it. David took his life in an unjust way. He manipulated his commanding general, Joab, in his foul plans. At this point, Joab is a more noble man than David is. In fact, the most noble of them all seems to be the cast-off soldier Uriah. This soldier is a foreigner, a Hittite. He seems to be a mercenary -- a soldier for hire. But if he be a foreigner, he seems to have understood the laws and ways of Israel better than Israel's king himself. The rules, for example, requiring withdrawal from sex during a military campaign might not have been Hittite rules at all. But they were the rules of Israel, so Uriah lived by them. Even King David's attempt to get him drunk so that his discipline would relax and he would sleep with his wife did not work. If David could get Uriah to sleep with his wife, then David can deceive Uriah and the world into thinking that the baby belongs to Uriah. But Uriah answers that he intends to live according to high principles:

<sup>11</sup>To which Uriah replied, 'The ark, Israel and Judah are lodged in huts; my master Joab and my lord's guards are camping in the open. Am I to go to my house, then, and eat and drink and sleep with my wife? As [the LORD] lives, and as you yourself live, I shall do no such thing!'

So, the golden crown, the throne, the royal robes belong to David, while Uriah is a common soldier soon to be killed. But in heaven's eyes, I do believe that Uriah is a more royal man than David is. After all, heaven measures things differently from the world. It is as Jesus says:

But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first. (Matthew 19:30, KJV)

There are nurses' aids, for example, all over our town cleaning and comforting elderly folk and sick folk, right at this minute, I bet. The world hardly knows, but God does! And the world might little have known what David did to Bathsheba and Uriah, but God did. One day, the truth of things will be revealed. And in that day, many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first. This is not a wish or a dream, but plain reality. This is how things are going to work out. David had no chance of getting away with what he did in those days of his cruelty.

## THE STARTING POINT

To my mind, the starting point of this story of moral disaster is the first verse. I will read it again, this time from the *Revised Standard Version*:

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go forth to battle, David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel; and they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem. (2 Samuel 11:1, RSV)

This, I suggest, is the starting point of David's sin: he lingered at home when he should have been out doing battle for Israel. He neglected his duty. It was springtime. It was the time for military campaigns. It was the time when kings "go forth to battle." But David did not go forth. He sent Joab forth. He sent his armies forth. But David lingered and lounged about, and in his lingering, he fell into great sin.

Still, when I shift from the deed that David did, which I can easily condemn, to *why* David might have done it, then I find myself feeling some sympathy for the man. Or at least, I recognize that what David did is not that uncommon for humanity. Perhaps this simple observation should give us reason for alarm. Lingered about instead of doing our duty does not seem that terrible of a thing. But such lingering can both reflect underlying troubles and lead to grievous sin and abuse of others.

## WHY DID DAVID LINGER?

So, why did David linger? Why didn't he put on his royal armor, hop up onto his royal horse, and go out to do battle? Why did he send others, but dawdle when it came to himself? Well, maybe he was simply being lazy. But that is rather hard to imagine. I mean, the call of duty can make even lazy people get up and do what needs to be done -- especially when their duty is a public one. And what could be more public than the king going out to do battle? Plus, if he was lazy, why was he lazy then, when he had not been before? He certainly was not lazy when he marched out to do battle with Goliath. Laziness had not been a part of his story in the past. If lazy now, how come?

The Bible does not say why David lingered. It just tells a story in which lingering led to great sin. But perhaps this story gives us a chance to consider a danger facing any of us: that danger is spiritual sadness. That is, David might have lingered at home because he had lost his feel for the true value of things. He had lost his inner

conviction that life mattered, that how he lived mattered, that whether or not he got up and went out to do battle was of any true importance. He might have lingered because he might have been blue. His spirits might have been low. He might have said to Joab, “You go. I will stay behind and consider large questions of strategy.” But he might have whispered to himself, “You go. I no longer care.”

Then, when he was strolling on his roof top, he spied a beautiful woman. And judging by his conduct then, not only did he see her, but he *had* to have her. He does not hesitate; he does not debate with himself. He simply plunges ahead as if compelled, as if driven by some demon.

Only, it might not have been a demon driving him. It might rather have been a step of desperation. He sees something that he imagines can make him feel alive again. Like a drowning man flinging his hand one last time toward the boat or a piece of debris, he plunges toward this beautiful woman his lingering has led him to see.

## LUST OF THE EYE

In a recent article in *First Things*, theologian Reinhard Hütter suggests that the lust of the eye is “not a ‘hot’ but rather a ‘cold’ vice.” What might start off as joy, so that the one looking at pornography imagines that he or she is only delighting in the joys of God’s creation, turns old and cold, so that the person pages through the magazine or through the web pages, unsatisfied, drifting onwards toward losing a feel for the dignity of persons. Cause and effect become confused, but Hütter suspects that the habit of pornography is connected with a kind of spiritual sadness:

It arises from the roaming unrest of the spirit rooted in a spiritual apathy that, again, despairs of and eventually comes to resent the very transcendence in which the dignity of the human person has its roots. The lust of the eyes that feeds on internet pornography does not inflame but rather freezes the soul and the heart in a cold indifference to the human dignity of others and of oneself.<sup>5</sup>

It is the old story: our heart and our conduct are intimately related, back and forth. Being low of heart can lead us into low conduct. And low conduct can make us blue. It can coarsen us. It can so mangle us that we are tempted along the path that David walked before us, to the suffering of everyone in sight.

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<sup>5</sup> “Pornography and Acedia,” *First Things*, April 2012.  
<http://www.firstthings.com/article/2012/03/pornography-and-acedia>

## GETTING BACK ON TRACK

For someone who has fallen, either into sin or into sadness of heart, what is the way forward? Well, let me begin by lifting up a line from this past Sunday's Psalm -- Psalm 119, verse 9:

<sup>9</sup>How shall a young man cleanse his way?  
[Or, how shall a young woman cleanse her way?]  
By keeping to your words.

Notice that the Psalmist is not content with "learning" the words of the Lord. He means to go beyond admiring the words of the Lord, beyond meditating on them, to "keeping" them. The Psalm imagines that the "cleansing" of our way has much to do with how we walk in this world.

Jesus, for example, also separated himself from his fellows from time to time. David separated himself from his army, Jesus from his disciples. But Jesus did not coarsen his soul in the process. He withdrew, but not to engage in sin. And if he was awake at night, it was not because he wanted darkness to cover any dark deeds. Rather, he withdrew in order to pray:

<sup>23</sup>And when he had sent the multitudes away, he went up into a mountain apart to pray: and when the evening was come, he was there alone.  
(Matthew 14:23, KJV)

The woman caught in adultery might have been a beautiful woman. Jesus might have found her so too, yet he continue to walk in the path of love and of truth. So he simply gives her a new lease on life:

<sup>10</sup>When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? <sup>11</sup>She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more. (John 8:10-11, KJV)

This is in full accord with what Jesus had taught in his Sermon on the Mount:

<sup>27</sup>You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." <sup>28</sup>But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:27-28, RSV)

## JESUS IS A KING, BUT NOT SUCH AS DAVID HERE

I conclude, then, with two thoughts, both of which I find to be encouraging. First, though David had fallen into great sin, with the Lord there is forgiveness. Thanks to

the ministry of the prophet Nathan, David came to the sudden understanding that “he is the man” -- he is the terrible sinner:

And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man. (2 Samuel 12:7, KJV)

And if David had at one time suffered from sadness of spirit, there came a day when he could speak of a clean spirit again with confidence that the Lord was well able to supply what David prayed for:

<sup>8</sup>Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice.

<sup>9</sup>Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities.

<sup>10</sup>Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.

<sup>11</sup>Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me.

<sup>12</sup>Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit. (Psalm 51:8-12, KJV)

My final encouraging thought is simply this: We are about to enter upon the great events of Holy Week. There we shall see that the true King is not such a king as was David in his dealings with Bathsheba. He does not send innocent Uriah off to die. Just the reverse, he is the innocent one! And he sends himself off to die. He does it for you, for me. He is the great and true King of kings and Lord of lords, even our Savior Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

# Peter Denies Our Lord

Luke 22:54-62, John 21:1-22

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is a thing to be marveled at that the foremost of the twelve disciples was both a rebuker of our Lord and a denier of him. Peter rose to great heights of faith, as when he gave his confession concerning Jesus, that he was the Christ. But also he fell to great depths of disloyalty, as in this evening's story of his denial of our Lord.

For his great confession, Peter won the praise of Jesus, singling Peter out:

<sup>18</sup>And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup>And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 16:18-19, KJV)

For his rebuke of our Lord, Peter won a stern rebuke in return:

<sup>22</sup>Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee. <sup>23</sup>But he turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men. (Matthew 16:22-23, KJV)

And for his denial of our Lord, Peter won a look -- a look that melted and broke his heart.

It has often been said that Peter was an "impetuous" man. He springs forward, without a lot of deliberation beforehand. So, in his enthusiasm he does all willy-nilly: he proclaims Jesus to be the long-awaited Messiah, he rebukes Jesus for speaking of the cross, and he declares that he will never forsake the Lord:

<sup>33</sup>Peter answered and said unto him, Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended. <sup>34</sup>Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, That this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. <sup>35</sup>Peter said unto him, Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee. Likewise also said all the disciples. (Matthew 26:33-35, KJV)

I think that Peter was indeed an impetuous fellow, and I rather like him for it. He was not lukewarm. Why, even Jesus himself seems to dislike lukewarm people, judging by his condemnation of the church in Laodicea:

<sup>14</sup>And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; <sup>15</sup>I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. <sup>16</sup>So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. (Revelation 3:14-16, KJV)

Lukewarm was one thing Peter was not! Furthermore, his denial of Jesus was base and wrong whether or not Peter had sworn that he would never deny Jesus. The problem was not that Peter was impetuous and too easily swore his love to Jesus. The problem was that he did not live up to what he had sworn. The problem was not Peter's spontaneity, but his falseness. He had pledged a good thing when he promised to be true to Jesus. He might have pledged it without much thought, he might have pledged it recklessly, but however that might be, he pledged a good thing and it would have been better if he had lived up to it.

Likewise with any pledges you and I should make. Some of my seminary classmates, for example, sought ordination to the holy office of Word and Sacrament. When they were ordained, they made solemn promises to be servants of God's Word. They made the promises when they were young, and for some of them, the intervening years have been hard. Who could have blamed them if from time to time they had thought to themselves, "I wish I had become a medical doctor instead of a pastor. I wish I had become an attorney instead of a pastor. I wish I had become a blacksmith or an artist or a farmer instead of a pastor!" But in taking on those solemn promises of ordained ministry, they committed themselves to a good path in life, and God bless them for being true to that path.

It is the same thing with our baptism promises or marriage promises. We might have been young and foolish back then, but those promises carry a lot of weight and we should try to live up to them.

So, Peter pledged well. He just didn't follow through well.

## **MONASTIC VIRTUES**

In terms of what are called the "monastic virtues," Peter fell short on the virtue of stability. One of Martin Luther's chief contributions to Christian spirituality was his opening of the monastic virtues to all Christians, not just to monks and nuns. He taught that the monastic virtue of voluntary poverty, for example, is an appropriate virtue for parents, who voluntarily make themselves poor for the sake of their children. Money they could lavish on themselves they instead devote to the overall welfare of the family.

Likewise with the virtue of stability. Stability asks that we not yield to the restless roving of the spirit. If we give our word, for example, then we keep our word, even if other interesting possibilities should come along. We are stable.

Peter, then, gave his word to Jesus, pledging that he would not abandon his Lord. It would have been good if Peter had been stable in this. It would have been good if Peter had stayed close to Jesus as he pledged to do.

## IMAGINE PETER'S SORROW

Imagine Peter's sorrow when the rooster greeted the morning sun with his crow. Imagine Peter's sorrow when Jesus turned and look at him after Peter had denied his Lord.

This Good Friday, following our Good Friday liturgy at 7 p.m., Gwen will lead a sacred concert, starting at 8:30 p.m. The piece is called "The Tears of St. Peter" by a late renaissance composer named Orlande de Lassus (1532 – 1594) The text of this piece has many moving passages. Here is one imagining what Peter could have been thinking when Jesus turned and look at him:

*No one should boast being able to tell  
how the already stricken Peter felt  
as he met the gaze of those holy eyes,  
for no tongue could even approximate the truth;  
it looked as if his Lord, surrounded by many  
enemies and abandoned by his peers, wanted to say:  
"What I foretold him has now come to pass,  
disloyal friend, proud disciple."*

This is what we do not want Jesus to say of us: "disloyal friend." Let us try very hard that our Lord not have to refer to us that way.

## RECONCILIATION

In this evening's Gospel reading from John 21, we heard of the reconciliation of Jesus and Peter. One day, you and I are going to have a similar pastoral conversation with Jesus, I am quite sure of it. The one between Jesus and Peter does not sound fun. Three times Jesus asks Peter whether he loves him -- three times, as if unwinding the three denials, and getting Peter back on track. Each time Jesus asks the question, Peter's heart seems to sink lower and lower. But at last, Jesus finishes his questions and bids Peter to follow him. Set aside all other considerations and simply follow Jesus: "What is that to thee, Peter? Follow thou me."

## LATER PETER WILL BE BRAVE

And Peter does follow Jesus henceforth. Sometimes he follows well, sometimes poorly (at least in the judgment of his fellow apostle St. Paul -- see Galatians 2:11ff), but never again does Peter deny Jesus. In this evening's story, Peter's courage fails him. But later, after his reconciliation with Jesus, Peter will be brave. For example, one day Peter and John healed a man crippled from birth. The man then leaped with joy and praised the Lord:

<sup>6</sup>Then Peter said, Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk. <sup>7</sup>And he took him by the right hand, and lifted him up: and immediately his feet and ancle bones received strength. <sup>8</sup>And he leaping up stood, and walked, and entered with them into the temple, walking, and leaping, and praising God. <sup>9</sup>And all the people saw him walking and praising God: <sup>10</sup>And they knew that it was he which sat for alms at the Beautiful gate of the temple: and they were filled with wonder and amazement at that which had happened unto him. (Acts 3:6-10, KJV)

This miracle led to the arrest of Peter and John. They were put into the hold and brought before the magistrates the following day. What had happened to Jesus could not have been too far from their memories, but this time, Peter did not wilt. He gave strong testimony to Jesus and his resurrection:

<sup>13</sup>Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus. <sup>14</sup>And beholding the man which was healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it. (Acts 4:5-14, KJV)

## **WE REBUKERS AND DENIERS**

We rebukers and deniers of Jesus, then: If we have too often rebuked Jesus... if we have heard him say “Do thus and thus,” but we have rebuked him, saying “No such thing! I shall go my own way,” then there is hope for us nonetheless.

And if in the moment of crisis, we proved to be a denier of our Lord, for us too there is hope. We stand in apostolic company, for Peter long before us, denied our Lord Jesus. Peter has walked our path before us, even the low parts of that path. But he became reconciled and restored to Jesus and then a better man. Let us follow this good part of Peter’s path too, becoming more loyal friends to our Lord Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

(The end of this year’s Midweek Lent Series.)