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Broken Beauty

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Genesis 3:1-12

A priest was coming back to his rectory one evening in the dark when he was accosted by a robber who pulled a gun on him and demanded “your money or your life!” As the priest reached into his coat pocket, the robber saw his clerical collar and said “I see you’re a priest. Never mind, you can go.” The priest tried to reciprocate by offering the robber a candy bar that he remembered was in his pocket. No thank you, Father” the robber replied. “I don’t eat Candy during Lent.”

Lent, as a season in the Church’s year has one purpose and one purpose only: to draw us deeper into the Easter story. Week after week, we follow in the disciples footsteps and gather on Sunday to remember the resurrection. Month after month, we hear stories about how the good news of Jesus’ rising from the dead is supposed to change our life – how it inspires mission and challenges goodness. And Year after Year we remind ourselves that our identity is as an Easter people.

But once a year, Lent challenges us to join Israel in the Desert and find Jesus in the wilderness; to rediscover our identity, not as resurrection people first and foremost, but as broken people in need of wholeness – sinners in search of salvation.

This is not a particularly popular topic, nor is it one I would very often choose to preach on – but it is important, I think for the same reason that a light is important in an otherwise dark room: not that you see it, but by it you see everything else.

This is the passage that reminds us that there is a rhythm to the story of God as it unfolds in scripture, and that because God’s story continues to play out all around us, and through the lives of our children and grandchildren, this rhythm is all around us. Creation, uncreation, recreation. As sure as night follows day, this is the rhythm of God’s story.

As Jan and I were talking it through the passage this week, we kept going back and forth on which story better defines our reality: Genesis 1 – where the rhythm is God speaks creation into existence piece by piece and declares it good, or Genesis 3 – where the rhythm is of falling and getting picked back up again. Which story do you lean your theology on? Original goodness or original sin? An argument can be made for either, but that’s not the argument I want to make

today. Because either story on its own is incomplete. Imagine a drummer who only plays the bass drum, or one who only plays the high hat. Either on its own is woefully incomplete, simply noise. But put them together, and they are something else entirely.

Like a butterfly with a broken wing, ours is not a story of goodness or wretchedness. Ours is a story of broken beauty.

Of God's good creation rent by what we do and have done – of actions with consequences; of a curse whose legacy we feel to this day, passed down not just through our shared human experience, but through the institutions and organisations we construct with fallible hands.

Lent challenges the church to take seriously its responsibility to address sin in all of its forms by reminding us that it is part of our story whether we want it to be or not.

So I want to share with you three brief reflections on why this story is

Sin lets us accept humanity as it is. Walt Whitman once said, "Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes." Humanity is nothing if not complicated, but plenty of ink has been spilled over the question of whether we are inherently good, and strive for goodness as a species, even though occasionally we get in our own way, or whether we are inherently evil and depend on institutions and laws to keep us on the straight and narrow. When you look at the scope of history, the question goes back and forth, but starting at about the sixteenth century, history veered strongly in one direction. The Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the Renaissance, exploded into being. Life got better, and everything seemed possible. The world looked like the question of whether humanity was essentially good or not had been answered. But as the nineteenth century began to wind down, in North America, the United States declared war on itself and brother killed brother. A generation later, in Europe Christian nations declared war on other Christian nations and found out how creative we could be when it came to killing each other. Mustard Gas became a tactic. Thirty years later, war broke out again and cities were leveled and six million men women and children were put to death because of who they were. A few years later Stalin would blow that number out of the

water and kill more than forty million civilians. Not to be outdone, Mao oversaw the death of forty five million Chinese.

The Rape of Nanking, the French Terror, the Rwandan and Armenian Genocides ... Over and over again, humanity has proved what historians now overwhelmingly believe: people are not good. More people were killed in the twentieth century than in every century leading up to it combined. And true, there were just more people in the twentieth century, but as soon as the human race had the means to realize the idealism of the previous century, we threw out the idealism and found new ways to kill each other in more efficient and creative ways. The central truth of history is that we're pretty much the opposite of good. Add to that the Stanford prison, or the Milgram experiments experiment and most of the twentieth century findings of psychology, the rise of radical religious violence, and the financial deceit that led to the economic collapse of 2008 and the conclusion is pretty inevitable: Humanity has a sin problem.

But Christianity alone names it. There are roughly 4200 religions recognized around the world, and in 4199 of them, sin is a human invention. It's what we do when we're not doing what we were made to do. Sin is when we are off course. Sin is a car that needs a new alignment. But Christianity sings a different song. Our Story says that sin is what we do when we're left to our own devices. Our story isn't a warning against falling into sin, it's a roadmap for how we get out of it. Genesis 3 lets us take the world as it is, rather than as we might like it to be – large and containing multitudes.

Sin makes the good news good. Imagine streetlight turning on at noon. How helpful would it be? The same is true of the gospel in a world that refuses to take seriously the reality of sin. I was recently at the Flourishing Congregations launch at Ambrose and when Canadian sociologists of religion look at common factors among growing, flourishing and thriving Canadian Churches, they almost without exception find that they are churches that address the question of sin. They're not accused of being bummers or legalistically dwelling on the negative: they're taking seriously what makes the good news good. Churches that don't or refuse to

wrestle with the questions of Genesis 3 will fade into irrelevance in a world that doesn't need another psycho-social feel good organisation. It won't matter if they have amazing kids programs or the most charismatic leaders – churches whose theology extends no further than God loves and wants you to love him back miss the point of that message. God loves you *despite who you are, despite what you've done, despite what you will yet do* and wants you to love him back *and honour him with a clean heart and an upright spirit*. That's why the German Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer so passionately railed against cheap grace and called it the great enemy of the church. "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ." Grace wasn't cheap for Bonhoeffer because it was free – it was cheap in the way that dollar store fireworks are cheap: they just don't work. If there is no Sauron to overcome, the Lord of the Rings is hiking documentary. If there is no death star, Star Wars is just a farmboy buying robots. If there is no Sin, the gospel is just one more feel good story among many. The church needs this story to make the good news of God's victory over sin and death actually *Good*.

Finally, Sin leads us into the wilderness where God provides. These last two verses are my favorite. Not just in this story, but in the whole Bible. The curse is spoken, God's essential holiness has forced him step out of the lives of the very people made in his image. But then God does something remarkable: he clothes them in animal skins. God who might yet be distant breaks into creation in the most understated way to clothe rebellious people with animal skins. Somewhere at some point, God rends the creation that he has called good to keep the people that he loves safe and warm. You are god's priority. This passage shows us that even while we were still rebellious, God has our interests at heart. He is in the business of saving rebellious sinful people – people he has just cursed. But people who still bear his image.

This is the beauty in our brokenness. A foreshadowing of a time when God himself will become part of the created order so that once and for all provide the sacrifice that will bring us home. The symbols on the table behind me