February Weekly Reflections

Creation – Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

We say in the Lutheran Church, “we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.” This is an acknowledgement that no matter how hard we try to live faithfully and be who God has created us to be, we always fall short. We do the things we know we shouldn’t do and don’t do the things God asks us to do. We turn to fear and doubt instead of faith and boldness. We mistrust our neighbors instead of embracing them. We put our own needs ahead of those in our communities and creation itself.

I cannot help but wonder if the failing of Adam and Eve is not just that they didn’t listen to God’s instruction but also that they put their own selfish curiosity above all else. They are not good stewards of the creation God has given them. They have not loved each other as they have loved themselves.

When we don’t listen to God’s calling, it isn’t just our relationship with God that is damaged. We damage the relationships we have to one another. We damage the good creation that God has given us. We repent this Lent of the ways our behavior continues to damage the world God has created and the communities within it.

Reflection Questions:

* How is the story of the fall like your experience of temptation? How is it different?
* What sins do you need to repent of this Lent?

The Woman at the Well - John 4:5-15

So [Jesus] came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."

The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?"

Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jews and Samaritans did not share things in common, nor did they really associate with one another. Although they had similar beliefs, their differences in the way they lived out their faith made it difficult for them to get along. So, it is unusual that they are at the same well. It is even more surprising that Jesus would initiate a conversation or ask to drink from the same vessel. The entirety of this encounter would have been difficult for both Jews and Samaritans to accept.

But that is exactly how Jesus behaves; his ministry often calls people who we would least expect. He criticizes the religious elite and breaks bread with the worst of sinners. His behavior and his preaching challenged the status quo of his day and continue to challenge it today. As Christians, we are called to love our neighbors and even our enemies. We are called not to value power but to value servanthood.

This Lent, let us not only reflect on our own sinfulness but on the ways we as community and we as a nation fail to love our neighbors as ourselves and strive to care for the most vulnerable around us.

Reflection Questions

* Make a list: who are the groups of people society cares for the least? Pray for them.
* How can we care for those in our community more fully?

God’s Promise to Abraham – Genesis 12:1-3

The Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Abram probably did not think of himself as “blessed” when he heard these words from God. He was being asked to do something extremely difficult—to leave everything he knew behind and go wherever God said. He didn’t know any of the details. He didn’t know where he was going or what might happen when he got there. He didn’t know how God was going to fulfill God’s promise.

And Abram had many reasons to doubt. He was being promised to have many descendants, but he was childless and already old. And even though God said that Abram’s name would be great and that he would be blessing, Abram still experienced many hardships and struggles throughout his life. The real fruits of this promise from God did not come to fulfillment until after Abram had already died.

When we think about our own lives during this pandemic, we can sometimes feel frustrated like Abram likely did. We might “know” in our hearts that God always brings about good things or we might believe that there are good things that come out of every situation. But it is taking a long time for those good things to come to fruition, and in the moment, we don’t always feel very blessed!

Despite the difficulties of his situation, Abram stayed faithful to God throughout his life, because God was always with Abram and God’s presence reminded Abram every day of what God had promised.

Reflection Questions:

* Do you find yourself waiting for God’s promises of blessings to come true?
* Is it difficult to think of the big picture when the “happy ending” seems so far away?
* What blessings do you recognize in your life right now? What blessings are you waiting for?
* How does God’s presence help you when there don’t seem to be any blessings?

The Healing of the Blind Man – John 9:1-9, 35-38

As [Jesus] walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man."

Jesus heard that [the people of the community] had driven [the man born blind] out, and when Jesus found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" The man answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him.

How is it possible for this man to spend his entire life in this community and people do not know who he is? After Jesus heals this man, the people are not able to identify him. They say, “it could be him or just someone like him.” The man has to identify himself to the people who should have known him his entire life. The people of this community labeled this man as blind and it seems like they do not know anything else about him. They labeled him as blind and that told them everything they needed to know about him.

This story illustrates something very dangerous and sinful about the labels we assign to one another. These labels become a stumbling block to truly knowing one another in fullness.

Labels are a means of writing people off. For this community the label of blindness meant sinfulness and the people used that label as a means of writing this man off as a sinner and unworthy of love and inclusion in the community. They did not bother to get to know the man because they had decided he was a sinner and not worth knowing. How often do we do this to one another? How often do we assign a label as a means of writing someone off? That person is a republican or democrat or that person is a woman or that person is gay or that person is black which tells me everything I need to know about them.

This story then illustrates something very liberating about Jesus. Jesus actually knows this man fully. Jesus has no trouble identifying this man without the label of blindness because Jesus knows this man with his entire identity. Jesus does not look at a label as a means of writing someone off; he recognizes that it is just one small aspect of who someone is and that all people are worth knowing fully.

Reflection Questions:

* What are the labels that you use as a means of writing someone off? Pray for forgiveness.
* How will you follow in the example of Jesus to know others fully? Beyond labels?