

Sermon: Sandbags of Sin

Year A, First Sunday of Lent

[Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11](#)

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When you work at a place like my other gig, a start up founded by MIT and Harvard to provide on-line education to thousands of people, you can actually end up having conversations about the shape of the atom while you wait for the Keurig machine to spit out your cup of coffee. Because there are physics and chemistry PhDs just hanging around waiting for their coffee. If you are like me, curious but with a tenuous grasp on the mechanics of it, when you ask your question about the stable basketball thing in the middle and the ping pong balls that whiz around it, meaning the nucleus and the electrons, the PhDs are very sweet. They answer your question and then they share a little tidbit. The model you learned in school is wrong. The nucleus moves and the electrons are really a schmear of statistical probabilities. And just when you look a bit sheepish and start to shuffle away with your coffee, they reassure you. The basketball thing is a good visual for helping you to understand the cloud of electrons thing – you need the one to get to the other.

Most of us learned about sin in Sunday School. We learned that if you want to avoid sinning, you should either do more good things, like doing the dishes OR do fewer bad things, like teasing your brother. Do more good, do less bad. The Sunday School definition of sin is the first explanation we use with kids so they could prepare to understand sin as adults.

Except that for most of us, we never left the simple model behind. The Sunday School definition says you donate to charity, you pray a lot and you avoid things you might enjoy. When we were six, we learned that it was a sin to paint the cat when we had our watercolors out. Although how you were supposed to get a small tiger, no one explained. As adults we take that lesson and decide that loving our neighbor means not plowing our snow into the end of their driveway. It does, but there's more to it than that. Which we kind of sense, but our Sunday School definition of sin doesn't help us explore that gut feeling.

In today's reading from Genesis, there are only two humans in the world, they have the entire Garden of Eden to take care of and very few rules. The rules they have are pretty clear: leave these two trees alone. So they go right over, take a bite. It's not wrong, but it's a pretty basic reading of the story. You could definitely teach it to second graders and it would be useful to them.

As adults, we might want to look at it slightly differently. Adam and Eve are human, they're finite beings who till and keep the garden which in turn gives them the food they need and ultimately the clothes they wear (Genesis 2:15-16, 3:7). We can so easily recognize ourselves in them, with dirt under their fingernails, wanting that first bite of a perfectly ripe apple. God, on the other hand, is an infinite being, with the power to create worlds out of nothing, breathe life into clay, create a garden where there was barrenness. Yes, we were created in God's image, but that almost serves to underline how great a gap there is between us and God, how poor a reflection of God we are.

We feel that gap all the time. An amazing sunrise, mist drifting between the trees as the air warms and the snow melts, the rush of water running in streams under and over and through the ice. It just opens us up. We are so aware of something greater than ourselves. We feel that gap

too, when we learn of Jewish cemeteries being desecrated, of people being shot in a bar because of the color of their skin or the accents in their voices. We want to raise our children in a world where those things do not happen, and it just seems beyond our ability. It would take infinite power and infinite love to change everyone's hearts so that such stupid cruelty doesn't get released into the world. We feel the gap between God and us all the time.

Like Adam and Eve, we are doers. Like Adam and Eve, we do things to close the gap between us and God. We know the gap is there. We're perfectly clear when we tell the serpent, "We're not supposed to eat from the tree in the middle of the garden" (Genesis 3:3). In fact we're so clear that we embellish it, making the gap a little wider, "We're not even supposed to touch it." (Genesis 3:3). But then someone else convinces us, or maybe we just wanted to be convinced and it didn't take much more than a talking snake to get us to eat an apple, so we would be like God (Genesis 3:5). We want to do something to close that gap. Anything. Even something that we know is not the right thing. So we eat the apple. And instead of knowing good and evil (Genesis 3:5), we realize not only are we naked, but everyone else is.¹ Talk about incentive not to do something like that again.

Time will go on, and we'll get used to the fig leaves. But we'll never get used to the gap. So we'll do something else to try to close the gap between us and God. We can imagine all the things people do to close that gap, heroin, alcohol, hurting their spouses or their children, harassing people at work, knocking over headstones, killing people who are not like us. We can identify that as sin, using our old Sunday School model of sin. But what about the people who volunteer at a million things, are deeply imbedded in their children's lives, dive deep into political issues? That can't be sin, can it?

We know people who protest regularly for causes they care about. And we know people who are constantly protesting so they can be seen protesting. There are parents we honor who put their kids first because that's what parents do. And there are parents who are so caught up in their kids' lives you wonder whose life it is, the kid's or the parent's. It isn't the activity or the amount of the activity that's the problem. It's the intention behind them. If the activity is to numb us to the reality of our limitations in tilling and keeping our patch of the garden, then we are trying to throw sandbags into the gap to get it to close. If the point of the activity is to keep us from fully realizing and accepting how finite we are and how infinite God is, then it's sin, no matter how many other people would see it as morally upright. Only God can close that gap.

That's what's so interesting about the passage from Matthew. Jesus has just been baptized by John the Baptist, on the edge of Israel. Jesus has gone into the wilderness, to prepare for his ministry, which will include the Sermon on the Mount, which we had been reading together leading up to Lent. For forty days, Jesus has been fasting and praying. The devil has shown up, daring him to fill the gaps, the roaring hunger in side him, the human desire for recognition, the longing for power. And Jesus says "no." Just like they taught us in Sunday School. Turn down temptation and walk away.

When we grownups watch Jesus as he enters his ministry after he leaves the wilderness, we see him fill not only his belly, but those of thousands, with loaves and fishes. He will set his face

¹ Cuthbert A. Simpson, "The Book of Genesis: Exegesis," vol. 1 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1952), 506.

towards Jerusalem (Luke 9:51) and he will go. Jesus will go to be recognized as the Son of Man, he will be crucified under the placard King of the Jews and even a centurion in the Roman Army will recognize him as God's son. Jesus will go to Jerusalem and the power of the crowds at his arrival will terrify the Jewish and Roman authorities. Even two thousand years later, Jesus' teachings still underlie political systems of most of the world, however poorly they are implemented.

So Jesus fed the hunger, got the recognition, got the power that the devil offered him in the wilderness. He walked away from actions in the wilderness that would try to obscure the gap between his humanity and God's divinity. Jesus worked in his patch of the garden, tilling and keeping it, as a human being obedient to a loving God who had been called him to teach the world how to love our neighbors and how to love God. Jesus did that the whole time fully cognizant that he was human and that there would always be a gap between him and the infinite power of God. To me, that is what made him sinless. Jesus lived with his longing to be united with God and he did nothing to try to fill that gap that only God can fill.

When I speak with families with kids under 8 who don't currently attend church, I have to say that at least 90% of the time, if not more, this is what I hear. First there's a flash of guilt, which I try to move through as quickly as possible. Next there's a sort of spine straightening comment about how it would be good for the kids, kind of like oatmeal or participating in team sports. Good for their moral fiber. Next, almost always, the parent then relaxes a bit, and in somewhat hesitant language talks about the gap between them and God. They have an instinctive feeling that there is something bigger than them, something they are already in relationship with, but don't have the ability to articulate. There is a longing to be more at home in the company of this greater something.

That's why I'm so sure that if we can find a way that works for those families, they will want to bring what they know and what they long for to this community. They already sense that there is something in their lives that could be fuller. They just need a way that works for them to explore that need. And so do we. Every week we show up here because we sense that gap and we want to live our lives more fully without spending needless resources packing sandbag after sandbag full of sin to throw into a gap that will never be closed in this lifetime. Lent is a time to reflect on our sin and how comfortable we are with it in our lives. It leads us in the span of a week from shouting "hosanna" to shouting "crucify". But perhaps the best thing we can give up for Lent is the Sunday School concept of sin and move into a more adult understanding of where and how it weighs down our lives.