

Stop It!

A Sermon Expositing Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

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A young woman stricken with crippling claustrophobia sought out the assistance of a therapist. Unable to use elevators, or go through tunnels, or even enter anything “boxy” like a house without experiencing terrible debilitating anxiety she wanted to explore the underpinnings of that fear. She wanted, no matter how hard the work might be, to find out what past trauma or unhealthy relationship or other issue might be expressing itself in such a way in her psyche. She told her new therapist that she’d never been buried in a box, but that image rose in her mind frequently and as she thought about it she could feel panic rising. He must have been really good at his job, because the therapist after only about two minutes told her he had a kind of mantra for her to remember whenever she began to think about being buried alive. “Oh, please, what is it?” she asked.

It’s just two words he said, when you start to think about being buried alive “STOP IT!” It may have done well for me to have mentioned that her therapist was Bob Newhart and the scene was playing out on a sketch comedy show. The woman inquired what he meant by “stop it” and Newhart’s character explained simply that he meant when she began to think about being buried alive simply “stop it.” With only three minutes allotted to that issue they moved on to other self-defeating behaviors the woman struggled with and with each the solution was the same, “Stop It!”

Clearly the sketch finds its humor in absurdity. Deeply rooted conditions of the human psyche can’t be changed by simply *stopping* some behavior or thought process. They require deep, challenging, and sustained work. Things that get embedded into our humanity - for lack of a better term – are usually very, very complicated and yet, the rich and beautiful (albeit quirky) text we just read so very often gets bottom-lined to a very simple story about the origin of a thing Christians have called “sin” and of that sin we rarely have anything more sophisticated to say that, “stop it.” The story is that a long, long time ago the first human beings did a thing they weren’t supposed to do and they have somehow passed the tendency to do things we aren’t supposed to do down through the ages to each of us and now we all do things we aren’t supposed to do – we all sin and we all ought to *STOP IT!*

When we are not at our best we also tend to interpret the season we’ve just entered, Lent, in the same way. It is a period of 40 days to find some thing and *stop it*. The thing we stop for 40 days isn’t necessarily a sinful thing, but we bear that discipline as a way of rooting out whatever is wrong about our behavior so that we can stop that too. We pay very little attention to how complicated all of these things can be. Anyone who has ever changed a habit will tell you that the things we do can be nearly impossibly embedded into our subconscious. The very notion of what “*sin*” is – what we mean when we use the word is also complicated. We are also aware, I know, that the season of Lent is more than identifying the “bad stuff” we do and stopping it, we just don’t always do a great job of saying what the *more* to Lent is. So if this season and our lives and the way we live them have more nuance than we’re used to giving them, perhaps a more nuanced look at our text for the morning will help us partway to a richer, fuller, more meaningful experience of Lent this year.

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

His name is The Man, HaAdam, literally the word for “man” used as a proper noun. Instead of translating his name though, we tend to transliterate it and call him, “Adam.” He along with his companion, “Eve” are archetype for all of humanity, they are not historical figures. The story is not history in that it reports factual events, nor is it history in that it sheds light on the past. It is a story told in the common genre of its time of an origin story. It reflects upon elements of life in the present and mythologizes their origin as a way of considering their place in life. In other words, the story of Adam and Eve taking the fruit isn’t giving us history, it’s giving us reality.

What if we actually read it that way? What if our forbearers in faith aren’t telling us that we’re doomed to a life of sinfulness, but simply saying that something is out of balance about our world? What if they aren’t telling us that every time I say a bad word I’m adding to a metaphysical rap sheet, but simply that I am a part of what happens in the world good and bad? What if sin isn’t simply breaking a rule or not adhering to some normative behavior, but instead is just a condition of the world being broken?

If we read Adam and Eve in that way sin becomes something different. It isn’t restricted merely to human behavior, but describes the general state of the world. Sin isn’t so much a thing that we commit, but a state of being that we walk around in – a state of our own being, but also that of the entire world. The story isn’t “the fall of humankind” as it is often billed, but the fracturing of all the universe. We humans aren’t off the hook, our behavior certainly plays a part in the brokenness of the world, indeed it *causes* the brokenness of the world – just not on a highly defined one sin for one consequence kind of way.

If we read Adam and Eve in that way and therefore add nuance to our understanding of sin then Lent too would have a bit more character to it. If sin is a condition of the world by which we understand ourselves to be affected, but also implicated, then the cross at the end of this Lenten journey does something more than wipe away the metaphysical stain of our shameful behavior, it actually changes something about the world here and now, because it changes something about who we are here and now. It switches our role from agents of decay, we might say “sinners”, to agents of redemption. Lent is, I believe, a call to action, a call to seek out where the world is messed up, where there is hurt and pain, discord and disarray first within ourselves and then throughout the world.

That isn’t really any easier to hear let alone easier to do than simply searching out our shameful behavior and stopping it, but it is good news! It means that the hard work of our next six weeks isn’t about wallowing in self-loathing yielding the end that we’re just not as bad of people; but that the work of our next six weeks is about proactive growth. Painful still, but generative, redemptive, heading off in the way of resurrection.

So however you spend the 36 days of Lent remaining, let your reflection help you recognize the brokenness of the world, use your prayers to ask God for a vision of a different kind of world, and let your disciplines work toward its healing. If by some chance you’ve begun a Lenten practice characterized by shame and sadness and guilt, STOP IT!

Amen.