

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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March 5, 2017
1st Sunday in Lent
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places

Just in case you were wondering, no, I was not listening to country western music when I picked out the title for my sermon this week.

I don't listen to much country music these days. But I have listened to enough of it over the years to know that the themes that are often in the lyrics of such songs take on the issues that we face that bring us anxiety, angst, pain, grief, and just plain sadness. There's something about the genre that cuts to the heart of the emotions that we experience across our lifetimes. And perhaps that is one of the reasons for the enduring popularity of country music that has us coming back to it over and over again.

Well believe it or not, the Bible and country music have a lot in common. Because the Bible and the themes that it picks up on, especially in the Old Testament, also take on anxiety, pain, grief and that sadness that we experience.

And surprisingly perhaps, country music does a lot of theologizing about the causes and consequences of human sadness. By the way, I've never seen it, but there is no doubt in my mind that there is a book or 2 out there that have been written on the theology contained within the words of many country music songs.

Theologizing is what we do in worship every week as we ponder the meaning of the Bible and apply it to our lives today. A quick review—theology is the study of God. It's what we do in worship, Sunday school, Bible study and other events where we study and grow, as Christians.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. The season of Lent began this last Wednesday on what is called Ash Wednesday. It's 40 days before Easter Sunday. In that 40 days, there are 6 Sundays when we take time to reflect and ponder the amazing significance of the life of Jesus—particularly related to the central importance of Jesus' resurrection that we celebrate on Easter Sunday.

The Lenten season often has a feeling of a journey to it—with an origin, a path, and a destination. And often the journey we take in Lent is to follow Jesus on his journey that ultimately led him to Jerusalem where he encountered the religious authorities and the Roman authorities.

This year, we're definitely taking a Lenten journey again. And that journey has the customary Easter destination. What makes this journey slightly different is that we're once again taking a page out of the Thursday morning men's Bible study curriculum. This means that rather than putting our primary biblical focus on the gospels in the New Testament, we're focusing on the Old Testament Bible readings—at least for this first part of Lent.

The story of Adam and Eve and the tree in the center of the Garden of Eden is one of those stories—the first actually—that were told by the people of God in order to understand part of the reality in which we live as human beings. The first part of the book of Genesis contains a number of these stories. These stories are not lodged in the historical chronology of the people of God. In other words, these stories are pre-historical. They are much more important than simply being a page out of history. They convey much more meaning than could be surmised from an actual historical event. In fact we

could say that these stories, rather than being historical stories, are actually more accurately categorized as theological stories.

In this case, it's about the origins of the relationship between God and the human beings that God had created. What happens in that garden sets the stage for all that follows.

Therefore, as we begin our Lenten journey this week, it is very appropriate that we begin it by renewing our understanding of the starting point with which we relate to God.

So let's review just a bit. First of all, there are 2 accounts of creation in the book of Genesis. The first is in chapter 1 and it's the story of the 6 days of creation. Remember, God created on each of the first 6 days and then rested on the seventh day. It's a very poetic account with the refrain of "And it was very good."

While the first story is poetic, the second creation story that is in chapter 2 of Genesis is a narrative. It's the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden. The 2 stories come from totally different sources. The only thing they have in common is that they're both cherished by the people of God because they point to God as the origin of everything in the universe.

This is the story of how God came to create the first human being and then of how God, not wanting this human creature to be alone, went about the search for suitable companions. The animals, wild and domestic, were created for the creature's comfort and companionship. And while there was some comfort, it wasn't sufficient. It wasn't until God took this genderless human and from it made a male and a female human being that finally human companionship came into being. One powerful takeaway from this story is that it is God's loving and creative intention that we not live alone.

So this is the background to this first event that involves the newly created man and woman. With the stage set, God puts everything in place in the Garden of Eden.

Through the ages, the Garden of Eden has been depicted in art and narrative as a utopian place of beauty and perfection. Everything that is needed is provided. The man and the woman are all set to live in eternal bliss and happiness. Out of love for what God had created, all needs were met. There is just one rule that had to be followed. "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." (Gen. 2:16-17)

It sounds pretty idyllic to me. The man and the woman had it made in the shade. What a loving God! God had created everything and provided for all of their needs. The only thing asked of them in response is to refrain from eating of the fruit of one particular tree.

Put another way. God loves you so much, first man and first woman, that God has provided you with everything. How do you show your gratitude? By obeying the one simple rule set down for you. This will express the reciprocal love of God by the humans.

As soon as the story begins, with the dialog with the serpent, things start to go south right away. The very first dialog in the Bible is this conversation between the woman and the snake. And from the get go, the primacy and supremacy of God is challenged. The snake, who by the way is able to converse with people, tests their understanding of what God had commanded. And when the snake hears it, he immediately challenges its truthfulness, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it [that is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] your eyes will be opened and you will be like

God. . ." (Gen. 3:4-5) Who is this snake to take on God at the very beginning of the Bible? It's right here that we encounter the first claim of alternative facts.

Well you know what happened. They ate the forbidden fruit. And what happened after that is not what the serpent predicted. Their eyes were opened alright, but what did they see? Their nakedness. Is that what it is to be like God? To know that you're naked? Maybe there was a hint of knowing good and evil there, but being like God?

The next thing they do is sewed fig leaves together to make loincloths for themselves.

And with this turn of events in which the human search leads not to God but away from God. It's as if they were looking for love in all the wrong places.

It is from this point on in the Bible that God seeks to restore that broken relationship with the humans God had made. While we might pause and consider the disappointment that is expressed by God for this human disobedience, that disappointment does not result in total estrangement, let alone death. Rather it's as if God doubles down on the effort to repair the separation and restore a complete relationship.

The story of the Bible then is the story of God's relentless pursuit of us. God's love for us was never obliterated. In spite of human attempts time and time again to look for love in all the wrong places, God never stops looking in our direction.

Sometimes the season of Lent can be reduced to a period of reflection and purification to once again be put right with God. While there is nothing bad in and of itself to reflect and purify oneself, the bigger meaning, the more complete understanding of Lent has to do with God's reaching out to us in love.

We're given the chance, every step of the way, to reach out and accept the embrace of God. Will we accept this embrace? Or will we be swept up by other attractions vying for our attention?

I invite you to enter into this season of preparation with your sights set on the many ways that God makes the possibility of reconciliation within our grasp. Whether that be through restored relationship with those from whom we have become estranged, or in changing our perspective on how we see the world around us, focusing on the inherent goodness of others.

We know the starting point.

We know that the destination is found in the Easter story.

Now it is for us to set the path between here and there.

Finally, it's good to remember that not all country western songs end in the dumps. Many do. But not all of them.

Just like the Bible, the greatest story of them all, is not a downer at all. Quite the contrary. It's what we anticipate celebrating 6 weeks from today! There's a lot of songs written about it. I bet there is even a country song or 2!

