

Good morning, this first Sunday in Lent. Quite a warning for those of us who've been here all morning, now, two very different services, two different ways of coming out the readings today, which are each of them remarkable in and of themselves and together are of wonder, of unfolding, if we take a look at them carefully.

So at eight o'clock and at the nine o'clock service I gave folks homework and I'm going to do the same for you, a couple of things that I'd like to ask you to do as this service goes on. One is to think about the story of the Garden of Eden that John read this morning as concretely in your brains as you can, to call into your mind a very concrete picture of what your eating might look like.

It was really interesting as we went around to the group that assembled for the nine o'clock service today to hear what everybody peopled and populated that Garden of Eden with. I think you'll find it interesting especially if you do that with some other people. In our Garden of Eden at nine o'clock we had all the things you would imagine and then a couple of things you might not imagine but we had animals large and small, we had fish, we had waterfalls, we had pools, we had lakes, we had seashores we'd have beaches, we had forests, we had worms, and muck of the forests, we had finally Adam and Eve and we had a snake. And there was more. All very concrete words though that picked that everybody who brought something to the Garden of Eden brought in very specific detail to that picture and that's sort of how I think we all think all the time. Now you folks here at St Martin in the fields pride yourselves on abstract thinking, I know you believe yourselves to be people of high intellect and with a moral responsibility to the written and spoken word, and you are that in many ways I think. But I bet you if you track that intellectual adventurism of yours back to its sources you will find pictures. you'll find quite concrete pictures of things for every word you speak, and I would suggest to you that if you don't find a picture with every word you speak you might want to find another word because you're going to be confusing somebody. That's just my mother's English class, teaching you through me, but I invite you into that process of thinking about the story of the Garden of Eden today that you heard as concretely as you can and to try to populate that Eden as concretely as you can because that's how we began our life as human beings in the world. That is one of our origin stories, that that story that we heard from Genesis, it's one of the stories we tell ourselves as sacred people of God and it like all the origin stories that have been invented and told across time by the entire human race wherever we may be, it is both very concrete and also a kind of metaphor for Who We Are and they're very interesting things in that picture.

So think about it and read it that, lesson that we heard from from Genesis, during the week ahead read it several times over. In an essay she wrote wrote called "The Soil That is Scripture", a theologian named Ellen Davis advocates that we should read the Bible with the virtues of humility, charity, and patience and she describes patient reading of scripture as akin to reading poetry: slowing down to ponder each word and each phrase and to wonder why each word was chosen and how that word leads on to the next and so on and on through the story.

And the story of the Garden of Eden is a great place to practice that little discipline which you might think of as a Lenten exercise. You might want to do this for all the Sundays in Lent with one of the pieces of scripture that we read together. I learned for instance that um that there are wonders in that story that I never knew, I've read that story I don't know a couple hundred times at least across my life and across my priesthood but I didn't know this. Maybe I was a bad student in seminary but I learned that the word that describes the snake in that story, "crafty", "crafty, wily" often translated "crafty", that word is אֲרִי, a-r-u-m in Hebrew and that's how the the serpent is described in the story. And it's also a pun of the word naked, which is our mean, which is how human beings are described. So the snake is crafty armed, the human beings are naked, our mean, and they are joined as it were at the hip, those two creatures: the snake and all the rest of us. The author of Genesis seems to be saying to us we are really one thing, there's no great difference between that snake and that human being in the story. The snake and we are the same that's just one of the things that you could discover if you spend some time with that story and there are many more I'm concerned that we try to do that to move a little bit away from the

abstraction of all of what we do into the other enterprise which is reading scripture patiently and carefully and concretely because I think it will teach us through Lent a very important thing which is how these stories of ours really speak to us about the circumstances of our own lives. I've been concerned maybe many of you have been concerned over the last few weeks and maybe even years of the eradication of our history in this country and around the world. Our history, our real true history as human beings, the eradication of parts of that history because of laws that are made that forbid the teaching and the learning of it into places where we go to teach and learn, from our schools. So in Florida now we can't talk honestly about the history of black and in some cases brown people because it's forbidden by law to do so. We can't even mention the word "gay" in Florida because that is forbidden by law and all the history that attends to all of those people is erased somehow from the history that we are being taught and that we are teaching our children. Our human origin story therefore gets lost because it is being eradicated. I think one response to that is to take a look at who we know we are historically and we know we began our lives somewhere in central Africa, which is kind of ironic when you consider that we're not allowed to teach the history of black people anymore in large swaths of our country, because you know that's where we all came from. We came from a people, as I said at the eight o'clock, we came from a people whose first language was likely clicks. I'm not a very good click speaker but I've heard click spoken and it sort of goes [linguistic clicks]

Sort of like that, it's not very good, I don't know what I was just saying, but that's what it sounds like but I bet you one thing I bet you the people who've learned that language, who taught themselves how to speak that language, were doing two things: they were imitating the sounds they heard around them and they were wrapping meaning, concrete meaning, around those clicks, so that I think every click or combinations of clicks evoked a very specific picture of something about the life and place in which those distant ancestors of ours were living and trying to speak to one another. And it wasn't very different, I don't imagine, from the way birds talk to one another conveying a certain kind of meaning across various human beings. That's where we know we began, that is in fact our origin story, we started off as those people and we have gone through history as those people learning more and more, getting more sophisticated about the words we speak and how we speak them and how we write them down and all of that so our understanding becomes more and more abstract, less and less concrete, but I'd like to call us back into the concreteness of our stories and think about that story you read about Eden and what it has to say about who we are as God's people.

I think you'll come away from that surprised every single time you read it. And then I want you to look a little bit at the Psalm we read today which is full of very vivid, very clear language. It's described as a prayer of penitence, that's why we're reading it in Lent. There are six of these Psalms in the book of Psalm, 6 kind of penitential Psalms. This one is particularly wonderful because it not only invites us into the activity of the prayer of penitential worship but it teaches us how to do that it teaches us specifically how to go about praying penitential prayer and it teaches us also if we pay careful attention to what we may expect as a response to that from God and most of all it teaches us about the psalmist's understanding of who God is. At the nine o'clock I ask people what stood out to them in that Psalm, what one phrase a word stood out to them, and most of the people in the room said hiding place. God in the psalm is described as a hiding place, a place we might go, a place of safety, where we are held by God, where we are held by the holy and the divine. The place we may go if we live through that experience of penitential prayer which the psalmist takes us through today and it's the most wonderful thing for me about that psalm, it's where it lands. So pay a particular attention to the last couple of verses of the psalm when you read through it this week. You'll find yourselves landing exactly where I invited all of you to be during Lent, you'll find yourselves landing in joy. Joy doesn't quite do it, happiness doesn't quite do it, what we're talking about here is what happens when we enter into the fullness of God's love for us. It's the experience of joy that comes when we enter that land of God's love and forgiveness and reconciliation into which you are called during this season and for all of our lives. I think that's what the

psalm is inviting us into finally, through the penitential process, moving through our grief, our hurt, our misunderstanding, through the process of beginning to forgive and into the land that God promises us, when we get there into the land of God's full Joy.

And then finally take yourselves to the top of the pinnacle of the temple. That's a great little story isn't it. I think I just imagine Jesus clambering up, you know like the people I've learned in seminary, I had a seminary classmate whose activity after, he had smoked enough marijuana anyway, was to go out and climb up the steeple of the seminary chapel which still stands at 42nd and Spruce, it's a mighty vertical steeple and he would go out there all the way up to the top and crouch up there like a grip on or something staring out over West Philadelphia from there. That is how I imagine Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple. Turns out people in the university towns of England make a whole thing out of that, clambering up and down walls and steeples and such like late at night, it's a thing. So Jesus maybe is the progenitor of that activity, I don't know, but there is Jesus at the pinnacle of the temple staring out at the whole world and being offered the entire world by Satan and Jesus turns it down and that little interaction there between that pinnacle view of the world and all that might be ours if we do certain things, and Jesus's recommendation to us that we think about going about our lives in a different way is spelled out over and over and over and over again in the life that Jesus then proceeds to lead as we know it in our good news gospel stories.

Jesus over and over and over in his life shows what it means to live into the land of hope and glory that is God's land, not Satan's land, by active, actionable, traceable, palpable activity in relation to the human beings around him. The healing, the loving, the lifting of all of that Jesus engages in is his direct response to the invitation to grab the world in the other way, the way that we are so often invited into.

I told the folks at eight that I thought our origins as human beings as evolutionary human beings suggests that we might be we might be most of all driven as human beings by the will to survive if you look at who we are and how we behave across all of history seems to me that what we've learned about our evolution as human beings is that our most powerful impulse is to survive and to procreate ourselves into the future, however and whatever we have to do, to do that we do it. Survival drives our genes, I think, and that may be one way of understanding the great thing that I'm not talking about today which is sin. There's a way of reading all three of these lessons today as lessons about that word we hear so often called sin. I just think it's mostly about who we are as human beings, we can't help being that way, it is how we are made, maybe that's what original sin is, but we believe there is another way and that other way is revealed to us in Jesus. And Jesus shows us that other way all the time. Now Paul today in an almost what seems to be indecipherable message to us, and that is something you can ponder for the next three or four months if you want, what we heard today. Paul does say some very interesting things about that enterprise of sin and where we land as human beings in it and of what Jesus means and what the grace of God is about. I take all of that to mean that the grace of God is what is given to us in Jesus as a way of contradicting Satan at the pinnacle of the temple, of all our temple pinnacles and saying no there is another way, and with the grace of God I will go that way. Paul says we have that possibility. We all have that possibility because of who we are in Jesus, because we are not only driven by the impulse to survive, we are driven by an equally powerful impulse, I think, to create and sustain communities of God's people. Paul uses that word twice in that lesson we are justified by faith and grace all of us. He doesn't say just those who believe in this or that, he doesn't describe that as a particular kind of orthodoxy to which we can attach salvation, he uses the word all. Christ is present, lives the incredibly powerful life Christ lives for us, dies for us, rises out of death for us, for all. In that way we are justified, we are balanced out, we are given a way to live our lives that's different from just surviving. We are all invited into that enterprise and Paul says we are all made perfect by that life of Jesus. We are all made perfect, all of us, every single human being.

So think about that when you're on top of the pinnacle of the temple. Think about that, you have another option which is to live your lives following Jesus's way, that we all have that option. We may not know where it takes us, we may never quite get there, we may like to him says have lots of rising doubt, we may like me and the horse or the mule that you'll also find in the psalm, be stubborn and mule-headed and not want to go in that direction but our our promise in the gospel today is that we can be more than the creatures of survival that our concrete history the place where we begin and end our lives and that kind of eating that perfect peace which we have promised as God's people is possible for every one of us by how we live our lives so I invite you in this Lent to live your lives into that concrete space where we can be concretely the people God calls us to be in our acts not just in our thinking but in how we live our lives minute in minute out all day, all night, long day after day I invite you to be people of Eden.

Amen.