

**March 13, 2011: OUT AND INTO THE WORLD**  
**Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11; Psalm 32**  
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At a time when I was wrestling with a personal sense of guilt, my pastor told me that nothing was perfect, that even the Garden of Eden was flawed. By that he meant that God had given humans access to everything in the Garden, “but not *this* tree.” Creation declared *good*, but with limits. I have come to embrace the wisdom of limits, of acknowledging, “It’s good that I can’t do [fill in the blank].” It might even be that embracing human limits is not only the point of our Lenten journey, it is our Christian vocation. Which makes this Adam and Eve story less about original sin and more about taking a productive place in creation.

From the start, humans had a purpose—to till and keep the Garden. If one takes the Hebrew literally, that means to act as a slave and caretaker of creation. Along with this vocation, God gave the two humans broad permission to eat anything with one minor exception—not *this* tree. Why do humans have so much trouble with limits? If you tell preschoolers, “Don’t put food up your nose,” you virtually guarantee the first thing they do. My cousin had two trips to the emergency room over that—once for a banana, once for half a peanut butter sandwich. What was his mother thinking? Of course no one would put food up their nose! Unless you tell them *not* to.

Whether or not you agree with Augustine that the Genesis story is about “original sin,” it is a little more serious than not putting food up your nose. A story of reality and consequences, it reveals the three primal human sins—*thinking you’re God* (“Eat this and be like God”), *in my case an exception has been made* (“God didn’t mean these rules to apply to you”), and *failing to take responsibility for it* (“She made me eat it!”). The sins are so primal that, when Jesus is tempted in the wilderness after his baptism, those are the very temptations he faces. To resist them must have required an incredible focus on God and his received vocation. It’s easy to say, “Yeah, but he was God.” He was also *human*, and he faced those temptations as a human. Famished as he was after 40 days *and* nights, he could have played God and made bread out of stones, especially since he was on the verge of feeding thousands of people with just a few pieces of bread! An exception really *had* been made in his case, so why not expect the law of gravity to be suspended if he jumped? As late as the day of the crucifixion, had he thought it served his purpose better, Jesus could have ducked responsibility for the sin of humanity and taken up the devil’s offer of all the power in the world. But Jesus accepted limitation as condition of his vocation. It’s the proverbial, “God could have sent a check, but instead came in person.”

When humans crossed the only boundary given them, God could have raged at them, uttered a spell, called in the Dementors. If humans were so necessary, God could have started over fresh with a Garden that needed no care. But just as God chose humans to do the tilling and keeping, so God chose a human to bring restoration. The sentence is mercifully commuted, but the consequences still stand. Death *will* come, but humans have another chance to carry out vocation, *broadened* to embrace the world (not just the Garden), shielded from our shame, protected from the unnecessary grief of thinking we can return to the womb of Eden. Grow up, go out, you’ve got work to do.

The vocation to till and keep creation sounds a lot like earth-keeping, at which we have failed colossally. Critical as that may be, there is more to our vocation than being green. Kathy and I just spent two days in presbytery meetings, and I am here to say that more than the earth’s crust is shaking and heaving these days. Nations, states, and institutions are in upheaval, and the Presbyterian Church is no exception. Our denomination’s constitution is in the process of revision, we continue to argue over the earmarks of who is worthy of the trust of

leadership, and all across the country, congregations are trying to come to grips with what their neighborhoods need from the Body of Christ. As you may recall from an earlier Meditation Before Worship, the Church is the only institution in the world that exists for those outside it.

Eastminster Presbyterian, our partner in the warming shelter in Portland, is exploring how to be church for the future, now that they have accepted the certainty of their dying. They talked to their neighborhood about its needs and what witness they should leave behind, and the warming shelter is one result of those conversations. This summer, Eastminster is sending its pastor, Brian Heron, on a 4,000-mile bicycle trip across the Pacific Northwest to engage in broader conversations about church. Other congregations will be invited to share in the journey, which Eastminster is calling, *Losing Our Religion to Save Our Soul*. Brian will ask three questions of the people he meets: what does the church need to let go of in this time, what does the Church have to offer in this time, and what does the Church need to be open to in this time? His journey is one way of wondering how to embody the *sending* portion of the Garden of Eden story, the journey into the world.

What if we saw leaving Eden, not as “fall,” not as “failure to accomplish God’s will”? What if we saw it, instead, as God’s gracious invitation to expand our vocation to till and keep? What if we understood our territory extended beyond the “garden” and into the world right at our doorstep? We don’t need to hop on a bicycle for 10 weeks to ask these questions. As we go about the business of being church during the week, we can wonder what (as people of faith) we need to let go of, what we (as a church) have to offer, what we need to be open to. Boundaries are necessary. Limitations are not flaws. They were part of God’s plan from the very beginning. We need to say, both corporately and individually, “It’s good that I can’t be [insert unfulfilled dream or limit against which you push], it’s good that I can’t do [insert habit you’d like to drop or ability you’ve lost], it’s good that this isn’t possible anymore.” Perhaps when we honestly face our limits and boundaries—maybe using the faithful example of Jesus to guide us—perhaps when we accept limits we will be able to live into our vocation with more integrity. What if we received expulsion from the Garden—the might-have-beens, the illusions of lost perfection—what if we received that being kicked out into the world as a merciful invitation from God to go out and live our vocation?

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