



RECLAIMING RELIGIOUS
LANGUAGE SERIES

FEBRUARY 22 | REV. T. J. FITZGERALD

SIN

I saw you rocking out there, some of you singing that like a closing hymn. I like it. I like where your energy's at today. You're going to need it because today we begin our Lenten series on reclaiming religious language. Lent. Lent is the 40 days before Easter and it is meant to represent the 40 days Jesus spent in the desert being tempted with worldly power before beginning what many call His public, His front-facing ministry.

It's not the last 40 days of His mortal life. It's the last 40 days of His regular life before He began His ministry set forth in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. After the end of His regular life, these 40 days, He started to attend board meetings and started answering pastoral care calls, going to fountains, and making sure the sanctuary was clean, if you catch my drift. There was also that legendary stewardship campaign of 32 when He convinced everyone to give everything they had and follow Him. Big haul that year. Was a legend. I'm going to be fine. Don't worry, there's no lightning storms predicted today.

Lent is the time, the 40 days and nights, when the pull of worldly power, the temptation to wield that strength to bend others' wills and bodies to His own, He turned down flat for the chance instead, rather to touch the hearts of humans in a truly radical way with radical love. And I bet you had no idea that giving up chocolate stood in such a rich tradition, but here it is.

But if we're going to reclaim religious language in this series or out in the world, we can start with Lent and what it really means, what it really comes from. And we're going to walk through this series together over the coming weeks to look at some other words that might be familiar to us, but we might be uncomfortable or unaccustomed to using. All right? We're going to do this for a few reasons.

First, words are for everybody, just like colors, right? Okay. One group doesn't get to take a word and own its meaning just because they say it louder, meaner, more threateningly or more often. Okay?

Second, these words that we're talking about, these ideas hold power, real power, power to revise our way of thinking about ourselves, about our neighbors and to love one another and this world better. They have power. And third, our religion. This faith has played an important role in better understanding these ideas, and that should be celebrated.

So let's start at the beginning. It's a very good place to start with the woman and the man in the garden. We heard it read so beautifully and so fun. They don't even have names yet. Remember the man and the woman, no names. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. When we meet them, just the woman and the man, her husband, they do say, in one story, the first one before this, God simply made them, created belly-buttonless walking around.

And then in this second one, this other story in Genesis, the woman was made from the rib of Adam. But however they got there, we heard in the reading they chose to eat from that tree of knowledge in the center of the garden. And as soon as they were caught doing it, what they were warned not to do, what did they do? "It wasn't me. It was her." "It wasn't me. It was the snake." Well, then we'll punish the snake and both of you too. Our kids grow up so fast, don't they? It's not my fault. They made me do it. I was just following orders.

And for eating from the tree of knowledge, the time of peace and unknowingness was gone and the snake was made low to eat the dust of the earth. The woman was promised hard labor pains of birth and serving the man, and the man was promised hard labor of work in the fields, tending them for his food. And it is beautiful, friends. It really is. The Hebrew language and the construction in this story is so playful. God makes man, man makes woman, woman meets snake. Then we get knowledge and everything we thought we knew literally gets reversed. Literally gets reversed.

Because first God comes and curses the snake, and then the woman, and then the man. Reversal of fortune, one of the oldest tricks in our literary books. And they're tossed out of the garden to fend for themselves. And this right here is where the idea of original sin was born or so we're told. But what is original sin? Seriously, what is it? You think you know. You might think you know, but there is no agreement on this, perhaps even in your own minds.

Some ancient writers say that the tree of knowledge was self-knowledge, that our childish ways give way some day when we are self-aware, aware that what we do impacts others or ourselves, and that selfishness, self-centeredness is the original sin, the root. Others say the act of disobedience to God was the real sin here. You were told something, you didn't do it, so everybody out of the pool. Others like to look ahead in the story a little bit. When the woman and the man were given names and when they had sex and they bore children and somehow equate this very human, very necessary, very enjoyable act as born of original sin. Still others say that the original sin of humanity was playing God, they say, forgetting that twice before in that moment actually the author describes the woman and the man as godlike, of God.

But whatever it was exactly... And don't ever let anybody tell you they know exactly what it was. The woman and the man left the garden and people call this the fall. So did anyone else grow up with this story? You've heard it before? Okay, I'm getting a lot of... So listen, nothing in the Hebrew language of that story in these chapters of Genesis says anything like sin or fallen, okay? It was not until Paul of Tarsus, writing to the Romans that came up with this first idea. This idea that the man, the man, the man, the man, not the woman, the man, just FYI, what he did was a sin. And that that sin somehow was inherited by all.

In fact, other writings in the first century, contemporaries of Paul, both in Ezra and 2 Baruch, these books, they did not make the cut when they were putting together the Bible. But these books, written right at the same time as Paul was, say that we are each our own Adam, our own Adam, which is Hebrew for man, and that each one of us is responsible for ourselves, and I quote, "As Adam was only responsible for himself." It's right there. And the serpent, that poor serpent never referred to as Satan, never the devil. Not once in this text. Sometimes a snake is just a snake, people. It's just the truth.

The centuries of vilification and casting blame that go on and on for that poor vertebrate is really too much. I really digress there. But the Hebrew scripture professor I had in seminary, Professor Collins, describes this passage and its genre really more as a fable as in the tradition of Aesop's Fables more than any other genre it has. And that makes sense because it is fables that are used to illustrate enormously important truths for us, for humans with characters that are relatable to us and also as it happens, this part of Genesis, more than likely they find, was written right around the time that Aesop was also alive in the fifth century BCE.

So there is more than an important truth going on here. There is some coalescing of the genre in here. This is actually the newest part of Genesis they have found through analysis of the text, but that's another sermon. But there's more going on here than we realize. I think there actually is a bit of a sin in this text that we've heard. Beyond playing God, beyond healthy sex or self-awareness or disobedience is the sin I name here as one of the great original sins of humankind, and it goes like this. "What did you do?" "He told me to. I was just following orders."

The dilution of personal responsibility and accountability. The blame of others for our own actions is not only a sin against those who are harmed by it, but against the inherent goodness of each of us and the freedom of choice and autonomy endowed in each of us by our creator, whatever that creator is in each and every soul. When we reclaim religious language, we must think theologically, yes, and we are going to do that, but part of theology must always be history.

There is a reason, many actually, that archeology programs in this country started and still, in many cases, are run out of the classics and the religion departments of universities. It's not just Indiana Jones. This is a trend. Napoleon took with him on his expeditions an entire archeology crew. Part of domination, part of knowledge, part of this work was collecting these antiquities to learn to hold and to have for there is great power in those. And good theology, must, must, must consider and grapple with and seek good therapy because of human history.

Neither history nor the front page of most newspapers lack any examples of this sin, this avoidance of responsibility. The millions of pages of files now that are released surrounding the actions, affiliations and practices of Jeffrey Epstein disclosed to us that people of all stripes, of all brands, of all political fashions will risk a bite at the apple if they can stay close to someone with massive, massive wealth and influence, which today, sadly, carry godlike powers.

Though I don't know what really goes on in someone's head who trades professional or financial favors with someone known as a serial sexual predator, including public admissions of his own conduct, signed in his own hand. I'm not just picking it out of the air. I don't know what it is, but I imagine that the distance somehow between that conduct and the advantages of the relationship were just cloudy enough, just distant enough to rationalize those favors being asked, being done to make some restless justification for that bargain.

We're watching, in a sense, in real time the unfolding of a closed system of the shared communal sin, not only of real and tremendous wrongs against the vulnerable, but of the willful ignoring of these wrongs, the setting aside of these concerns because those in the system of these relationships imagine falsely that stopping it is somehow someone else's responsibility.

And religious people doing wrong in the name of their God is the flavor of the same poisonous food we see today. It's only another way of avoiding personal participation and responsibility in systems through history that perpetuate wrongs that prolong suffering because nobody has quite enough responsibility or maybe quite enough authority or quite enough ability to stop it. But systems built to avoid responsibility for harms are evil systems and must fall or be undone.

Sure. To do that, to tackle these systems takes responsibility. It takes autonomy, it takes belief in your own power, your own values, in a word, your own blessing. And then building collective corporate power through relationships and dedication to address these systemic wrongs. One of the most important theological beliefs of this faith is that of original blessing. For me, when I think of that, I think of the woman. Before she had a name, who chooses a real life, not to be coddled in a garden or neuter somehow, but to be an engine of change and of new life.

That is what Ansel Elkins' poem tells us. She offers an image of Eve in fresh snakeskin boots, only boots I might add, standing in terror as she hears a woman's voice, recognizes it as her own and says, "As she awakens from that dream, let it be known I did not fall from grace. I leapt to freedom."

Laying aside that putrid notion that our very birth is a curse that needs repentance is the first snakeskin step we can take to freedom. Now that is a freedom, and hear me on this, it doesn't disavow a loving God. It doesn't even disavow Jesus if you are a believer in Him and His works. It is rather a blessing confirmed by the original meaning of the text and the author of that text. Because we now have thousands, thousands of years of seeing what not taking personal responsibility for wrongs perpetrated upon others will do to a world.

The founding of this nation's upon stolen labor, the genocide of its original inhabitants in these lands, the subjugation of women for millennia all found their support in scriptures, all found their champions in churches and all are closer to this nation's original sin than any apple-picking woman ever will be.

I almost went with pomegranate-plucking, which is more accurate and fun. I was worried I would mispronounce it though. That is why we teach. That is why we teach about original blessing here. That is why our children are taught that we saw this morning about that amazing gift, the amazing responsibility that comes with that gift to be a person of conscience in this world. And that might be why last week a number of our young people organized and led walkouts in their schools to protest the inhuman treatment by ICE of their neighbors and friends.

We're doing something right, friends. And now the state of Texas is forcing some districts, you may not know this, to assess penalties on those same students wildly out of proportion to the amount of time they actually missed in school, and that's a crime. Paul and the state of Texas are the hisses we get today. Because listen, guys, the threat to all liberty that is posed by a massive federal police force operating without warrants, without restraint, and without a shared and central conscience, it is more massive than many realize, but the kids seem to see it pretty clearly.

While state authorities, see, can be investigated by federal ones, there is no precedent in this nation's history to a federal police force of this size and this operational breadth operating in ways that defy oversight by states and municipalities. When I went to Minneapolis, they understood this. I went there a few weeks ago and I saw it in action. When this was explained, the words they used was to say, "There is no one coming to save us. We are the ones we have been waiting for. Our neighbors are our responsibility."

That's right. If you saw news coverage of the action at the airport, actually Daniel's friend, Justin Schroeder was there, who spoke here on Daniel's 25th ordination anniversary, along with a dozen of his colleagues. He was arrested and cuffed and placed in buses while standing there against the serial lawlessness of snatching people from their places of work or from their homes and flying them from that airport to ports unknown around the world. I was standing just feet from these ministers looking at their faces. They were kneeling there, praying, singing, locking arms.

I swear to you, I could see the frostbite coming for their faces in real time, the color changing right before our eyes. But they sang and they prayed for mercy to return to our world. Behind them, the police masked, fully covered. I understand it was negative 45 windchill, but still, talk about chilling. In this case, these ministers were being ungovernable in that moment in the face of practices, maybe even laws that are unjust laws for it is wrong to obey an unjust law.

For when at last it is the law itself that shrouds the actor of an evil in the false skies of righteousness, that is the time, perhaps the only time left for people of conscience who want a free future to act to stop this sin that always comes when people are just following orders. He told me to. I've heard it all before. Our kids led those walkouts here. Friends, we've taken this moment, but I want to say it clearly

in case they're watching. I congratulate them. I congratulate their parents and I am proud of them here. If that gets me in any kind of trouble, okay, that's fine.

I pray that these bold actions led by them and others that we've seen, friends of this congregation, your ministers, your friends, our allies are only the beginning of a ministry in this world, a footfall on the path out of the quiet convalescence of some garden and into the real life our ancestor earned for our choice. And may the blessing of responsibility of intention and doing things on purpose where we say we will help wipe that sin of only following orders of diffused responsibility for evil off the face of this aching earth, please.

This blessing in each of us to heed and follow a conscience is the promise this faith makes to our future. It's the true birthright of every human, of every stripe. It is the great virtue of a religion that sees wrong and seeks justice, that sees harm and sows peace, that sees sin and sings to the world its song, your song, our song of grace. May that be our faith. May that be our strength. May that be our future. May it ever be so blessed be and amen.