

The Rev. Josh Stephens
St. John in the Wilderness
March 1, 2020

The First Sunday of Lent:
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7, Psalm 32, Romans 5:12-19, Matthew 4:1-11

Seeing Clearly

I mentioned last week how grateful my family and I have been for your warm welcome, including the many meals we have received from our meal ministry here. We are grateful, indeed, for this support during our transition. There is one thing that I feel like I need to come clean on, though. This is the season of confession, right? A few times these weeks I have checked the Parish Hall freezer and found meals that many of you have made for us. There have been so many, in fact, that I've had to search for a box to carry everything out to the car. On one of those occasions, in a moment of haste, I took a certain round cake that has weighed on my conscience. With the clarity of hindsight, I am wondering now if that very delicious and surprisingly moist chocolate chip pound cake was actually for me. The problem with this confession is that I have yet to feel any remorse because it was so good. We might say that I failed the test when temptation came my way and I'm almost sorry!

When we encounter temptation, be it a chocolate chip pound cake or something slightly more sinister, what are we to do? What about when we encounter love? Do we know what to do with that? Can we recognize evil for what it is? Can we recognize love when we see it in us or around us?

These questions make me think of the novel by Ian McEwan called *Atonement* which was a bestseller in the early 2000s. In *Atonement*, one of the main characters is a girl named Briony who is just becoming a teenager. She is still very much a child but she longs to be an adult. She longs to be taken seriously. The beginning of the story takes place on an English country estate in the summer of 1935. Briony's family is gathered, her older siblings home from university and work, bringing friends with them. They also have a few cousins staying for the summer.

The story takes an unexpected turn when the two youngest cousins run away one night. There is an all-hands-on-deck search for these young boys. During the chaos of this nighttime emergency, Briony witnesses a terrible crime. It was dark outside when she saw this traumatic thing but she is sure of what she saw and of who she saw doing it. When everyone gets back to the house later that night -- the cousins having been found -- the crime Briony witnessed comes out and she knows it's necessary for her to speak up. This is her moment to be taken seriously. She accuses their house keeper's son, Robbie, of doing this thing which he vehemently denies. "He's an evil maniac," she theatrically declares. Briony's older sister is in disbelief because she and Robbie have recently fallen in love and she is certain her sister is living in the land of fantasy where she often dwells. The reader doesn't know what to make of it either as Robbie -- the only non-aristocrat present -- is dragged away by the police with only his new girlfriend arguing for his innocence. Young Briony knows what she saw,

though. She is confident that she is seeing clearly, recognizing evil for what it is and saving her older sister from a false love that confuses her.

Our Scripture readings speak to these moments of trial, also. Adam and Eve are in the Garden. God is good. Creation is good. All is as it should be. They are part of God's love on the move, God speaking into existence new life, and yet Adam and Eve cannot recognize that love for what it is. When they face the time of trial, they are found wanting and something enters the world that changes things. The goodness and love that God breathed into existence is now harder to see. Perhaps the Fall was eating the forbidden fruit, as we say. Perhaps it was that distrust of God. Or maybe it was not being honest about the mistakes made. Regardless, our spiritual ancestors were missing something. They were not seeing clearly.

What would it take to undo this ancient yet ever rippling wrong? What would it take for creation to be restored to its former glory? What would it take for us to see God's love for all that it is and to recognize the path of sin and to go the other way? What if someone came -- a second Adam -- who entirely trusted God's purpose for the world? This person would face every hardship, every temptation, that we face and would uncompromisingly claim love, share love, and refuse the temptation of convenient power even if it cost him his life.

The first Adam failed the first test. The second Adam, not once, not twice, but three times is offered a quick path to glory. Each time this new Adam, Jesus of Nazareth, sees temptation for what it is and he sees God's love for what it is, also. He seems to be carrying that love in himself, sharing it and bringing it to those who have never been loved before. It's as if he's undoing the Fall. The Creator God, through this Jesus, is on the move again.

Going back to the story of *Atonement* (the novel, that is), Briony does not stay young forever. She matures spiritually, we might say. She knows that what she saw was evil but she comes to realize that she did not understand it at the time. She also realizes that the love between her sister and Robbie was genuine. She can see that now. What she thought happened did not happen that way. Briony begins to see herself clearly, too, because she admits that in her confusion, she hurt the people she loved the most. So Briony dedicates her life to atonement, to making amends.

These forty days of Lent are a time that the Church has found most useful to take a step back from the hustle and bustle of life -- as important as that can be -- and to make sure that we are seeing clearly. Can we see sin clearly, both the sin that exists within us and that of the world around us? Can we recognize the incredible love we have been given in Christ Jesus, a love that ripples out through us to our families, our friends, and our community -- a love that (as we will come to see) even death has no dominion over? It's a love that clears our vision to see the world as God created it to be.

In Lent, we are reminded of God's vision. Even if we don't know where to begin, we speak words of confession together and we hear repeatedly, unapologetically, words of compassion and grace. We hear words of God's welcome to us. We receive God's absolution and forgiveness again and again. Through this season of grace we finally begin to see clearly.