

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

Genesis 2: 15 – 17, 3: 1 – 7  
Romans 5: 12 – 19

Psalm 32  
Matthew 4: 1 – 11

-----  
*"It's not easy being green," Kermit the Frog sings...  
But green's the color of spring  
And green can be cool and friendly like  
And green can be big like the ocean,  
Or important like a mountain,  
Or tall like a tree.*

*When green is all there is to be  
It could make you wonder why, but why wonder? Why  
Wonder, I am green and it'll do fine, it's beautiful  
And I think it's what I want to be.*

Kermit is, of course, referring to his skin color, but at the same time that Kermit was coming of age back in the 1960's & '70's, the world around him was just beginning to understand the concept of 'green' as it applies to all of Creation. Green, as in environmentally mind. Remember the ecology flag, tree-huggers and Euell Gibbons? But Kermit was right, it wasn't easy being green.

In the early 1970's, my brother, John, was working on his Eagle Scout project. He decided to do a glass recycling program, because there was nothing readily available for folks at that time. Back then, many more items were packaged in glass instead of plastic, and I remember picking up glass along the roadways, collecting it from other households and elsewhere, and then helping to separate it all by color into 55-gallon trash cans. We got to smash it up which was fun. John recycled about a ton of glass, which is quite a lot of bottles and jars.

Rachel Carson had published her whistle-blowing book, *Silent Spring*, in 1962, alerting the public to the problem of pesticides contaminating not only the soil, but the air and ground water. Ladybird Johnson had begun the "Keep America Beautiful" program in 1964, so there was some emphasis on litter control and beautification through planting and preserving landscapes. The EPA was founded in 1970 under the Nixon administration to help monitor and clean up pollution. But by the mid 1970's, there were also fuel shortages, and most of us who are of a certain age can remember the long lines at gas stations. Toxic waste sites, like Love Canal, were being identified and the government wrestled with huge clean-up projects. Built-in obsolescence wasn't quite as prevalent then – people expected items to last longer or they got them repaired, but we were already on our way to becoming a disposable-oriented society.

Why this little trip down memory lane? Well, because our theme for Lent this year is Creation Care – our role as stewards of the environment (God's creation) all around us. And because today's lessons are about knowledge and power and temptations. And Creation.

"The Lord God took the *adam* (the earthling) and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and to keep it." What does it mean that God sets humankind in a garden as our first home? What might it mean that even in paradise there is work to be done? Humanity, surrounded by the green lushness of the Garden of Eden. Humanity, in balance with the rest of Creation. Why a garden, and

does that make God the Master Gardener? Jumping ahead to Easter on this First Sunday in Lent, isn't it curious that when Mary Magdalene first encounters the risen Jesus, she mistakes him for the gardener?

Then there is the issue of God telling the *adam* to eat freely from all of the trees in the garden. All but one. The earthling is not to eat of the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil." So choice arises. Knowledge arises. Temptation arises. And consequences arise. If one eats of *that* tree, one will die.

Richard Rohr, in the book for Steve's class, *The Divine Dance*, writes that we cannot know something if we don't first apprehend it with our minds. He suggests that that is what this passage from Genesis is warning us against: that we will be tempted to "eat voraciously from that forbidden tree of knowledge" before we ever have sense enough to respect and honor that knowledge that we are ingesting. That, he says, creates very entitled and proud people. "All of life becomes a commodity for our consumption...to eat of the tree that promises to give [us] divine knowledge of good and evil is the tree of death." And are we not doing just that with Creation – eating of it voraciously, treating it as a commodity for our consumption, and traveling down the road to death?

We are limited and fallible creatures, and though we may feel like we know a lot, or at least a lot more than what our forebears knew, all of our knowing is also limited and fallible. As the apostle, Paul, writes, 'now we see through a glass darkly.' We don't have complete knowledge, and what we do have, we don't necessarily know what to do with it. The truth is that we *don't* truly know good from evil, only God does. That, Rohr points out, should make us humble and patient. But Rohr points out that even with all of humanity's limitations, God chooses to take the immense risk of allowing us to "eat of all the trees in the garden." Included in the choices is the "tree of life" from which we can choose to eat and live forever. The only ones who "must not be allowed to eat" of this tree, Rohr notes, are precisely those who arrogantly think they are "like one of us in knowing good from evil," that is, like God. And that, plain and simple, is basic human hubris. Not knowing our place as creatures in relationship to the Creator. Such arrogance in human knowing can never lead to true life for us; it can only lead to death.

"We live in a world where naked knowledge of facts is allowed to have all the sway and all the say," Rohr writes. Lots of people with lots of information, but very little ability to use it for the good of the world. And that seems to be so much in evidence in our lack of stewardship of Creation. Recent headlines have questioned whether or not we are past the point of no return in climate change.

Compare the lushness, the coolness, the greenness of the Garden of Eden with the wilderness into which Jesus is driven. A wilderness of sun-baked, parched earth and dry, blowing sand. Hard rocks and little, if any, shade from trees and shrubs. A stillness of life, marked only by scorching sun and howling wind. There are no trees from which to choose fruit. There is only barrenness and hunger. Perhaps it is a foreshadowing for us. It is here that Jesus faces the very same temptations as the first human beings in the Garden of Eden.

"Turn these stones into loaves of bread!" the tempter challenges Jesus. "Try it, you'll like it!" the crafty serpent encourages the woman. *Both* tempter and serpent appealing to our craving nature. *Both* ever-so-conveniently glossing over the fact that God provides all that we truly need, though not necessarily what we want. *Both* encouraging that everything is for our use, our consumption.

“If you’re really who you think you are, show your power! Jump off the top of the Temple and prove it!” the tempter next commands. “Go ahead, eat it, you’re not going to die!” hisses the serpent. Power versus stewardship. Conquering, triumphing, controlling versus honoring, tending, nurturing. Domination versus kinship.

“This can all be yours!” the tempter tries once more, ever so quietly inserting the stipulation that the ‘lordship’ comes with the small “I” of subordination to the tempter. “You will know everything there is to know,” schemes the serpent, moving in for the kill. Your ways are not my ways, says the Lord, nor your thoughts my thoughts.

Thirteenth century Franciscan theologian, Bonaventure, wrote that ‘the first book of revelation is the ‘Book of Creation.’ In other words, God is revealed all around us in the created world. It is the idea that creation is God speaking to us. [*Care for Creation*, p. 9] But it is an idea that is fast fading from our culture and our world.

Environmental problems *are* religious problems, posit the authors of *Care for Creation: a Franciscan spirituality for the Earth*, one of this year’s books for the EfM program. Environmental problems are religious problems precisely because, at their core, they are crises of meaning. Humanity cannot address these issues without addressing the questions of human consciousness and moral vision. We cannot address them without first recognizing our connectedness, our kinship with all of Creation.

But our recognition, our acknowledgement of that existential condition is not enough. Soil and water conservation efforts started back in the 1930’s with the dust bowl crisis, created by unsustainable farming techniques. So we have been aware of our impact, our footprint, at least that long (and probably a lot longer). But in the intervening eight decades, we have only made matters worse for creation, and not simply through agriculture. However, the myth of infinite resources is ever-so-slowly beginning to give way to an awakening to the fact that we live in a finite system.

Our ways are not God’s ways, but they ought to be. God has given humanity free reign to hang ourselves and we seem rather intent on doing that. But that is not what God desires. God desires life. Not just humanity’s, but life for *all* of creation. God takes the freedom and the immense risk of allowing us to “eat of all the trees in the garden.” This Lent, how will you and I, and all of us together, choose to respond as Jesus does, rather than how the man and woman in the garden do? How will we choose life, choose Creation, choose God, rather than all the other choices with which the world presents us? Choices that will ultimately lead to death. What will we begin to NOT do this Lent that leads towards a greater stewardship of Creation? What will we begin to DO that nurtures not only our relationship with Creation, but also our relationship with God? (handout) +