

Why Do We Need the Manger: *Eve and the Need for Hope*

From Genesis 2:22- 3:21; John 14:1-6

Jesus came into this world to meet our deepest human needs. Do you believe it? This is what we'll be considering throughout this Advent Season 2018, i.e., how it is that Jesus came into this world to do what had to be done so that our deepest human needs might be filled. As we do that, we will join churches all over the world in addressing what may be the four most basic human needs:

- The need for hope – and its frequent cause, i.e., loss.
- The need for peace – and its opposite, unfulfilled longing.
- The need for joy – and its counterpart, emptiness.
- The need for love – and, in its absence, alienation.

How should we begin to discover in what ways Jesus actually meets those needs? In our day, if I ask certain questions, my muscle response is to pick up my iPhone and ask something like, “Siri, where is the closest Mexican Restaurant?” And, she (or “it”) does a pretty good job at answering that kind of question. But, she doesn't do so well at answering a question like “Siri, how does the manger answer my need for hope?”

I have been finding that there are other women, women in the Bible, whose life-stories raise that kind of question in such a way that we can look at the coming of Jesus and how his birth, life, death and resurrection result in giving us the opportunity to have our deepest human needs fulfilled. What we will do this Advent Season is have the life of a significant woman in the Bible point us to our need. Then we will turn to the end of the life of Jesus to hear him teach how his coming, beginning with his birth in a manger, addresses that need.

So, we start with hope on this first weekend of Advent. And, to help us grasp the deep need we have for hope, we turn to the real 1st Lady of the Bible, i.e., Eve.

The Story of Eve – *After the LORD God drove the people out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life (3:24).*

What I want you to do today is to think of Eve simply as she was, a human being made in God's image just as you and I are. When we first meet her in Garden of Eden, Eve was a woman who had everything:

- A home in the best location ever existing on earth.
- A marriage in which she was side-by-side with her husband, adored by him. That is clear from Adam's exclamation in **Gen 2:23** – “*This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!*” She was taken out of his side; not out of his feet. She would be his “ezer” (cf, Gen 2:18), his help, his rock, the one who would do life with him. Adam was thrilled because he knew there was no one in the world like her.

- Her life was one of inner wholeness – God was her God and dwelled with her. Everything was

out in the open and there was “no shame” -- the Bible says.

But, she had lost it all. You might say that she threw it away – all of it for a piece of fruit. A serpent had convinced her that there was even more being kept from her – that the God who had made her and given her everything was trying to keep her from real living. The grass always seems to be greener somewhere else, doesn't it. And, instead of believing God and trusting God, she distrusted and disobeyed.

An, the loss she experienced was catastrophic:

- Her life of inner wholeness with no shame was broken as we see her in **3:7-9** feeling she had to cover herself before her husband and hide in the bushes from God. She was so ashamed!
- Her relationship with her husband was disrupted. Instead of praising her, he blamed her. And, the consequences for her disobedience hit at the heart of her marriage. God's message to her in **3:16**, “*Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you*” is the language of a power struggle – instead of a mutual and trust-filled relationship. “To love and to cherish” degenerate into “to desire and dominate.” When you read those words, remember please that they are not saying that's the way things should be. They are the result of sin in this world.
- And, of course, she lost her home too. She and her husband were banished from that place of belonging in which she and her husband walked and talked with God.

Her one remaining hope might have been having children – though having them would cause physical pain (**3:16**). However, as you know, after having sons, her heart was broken again when one of her sons killed the other. For any of us who have lost children (as Chris and I have) and, even more, for all whose children have gone astray: **Is there anything more heart-wrenching than that kind of loss of our children?**

And, from all superficial appearances, things would remain that way – not only for her and Adam but for all people who would follow. All of this loss – one thing after another – must have led to Eve having a deep experience of hopelessness – maybe even despair.

And, yet there were **two small indicators that God was not done with Eve** yet. Let me show them to you:

1. In **3:15**, one of her offspring would someday actually crush the head of the evil serpent.
2. In **3:21**, God provided for her – better and more lasting clothing than the leaves she had chosen. It's a practical demonstration that this powerful and holy God still cared for Eve even after she had failed.

Eve's story points us to our deep human need of hope? But, when and how could hope ever be renewed?

The Coming of Jesus – “*I have come that you may have life – life to the full (Jn 10:10)!*”

The story of Eve brings us to the manger. **Does the coming of Jesus actually speak to our human need for hope?** To answer that, we turn to Jesus’s final discourse in John 13-16, one given to his disciples just before he went to the cross to die. In that time with his disciples, Jesus looked back over his life as well as forward to what his death would accomplish. As he did, Jesus pointed us to what we’re talking about this Advent Season, i.e., that he came to fulfill the deep human needs that all of us have had ever since sin entered the world.

Just as we looked at Eve as a real human being facing the real issues of hopelessness, so too I want us to look at Jesus’s 12 closest disciples as real men living in this world. When we come to John 13-16, these men had left everything behind to follow Jesus. They had wrongly thought that they would have immediate success, as the world views success, following this one they thought might be the Messiah. But, what they had experienced was, as was the case with Eve, loss after loss after loss:

- They had lost the respect of their families, sometimes feeling cut off because of their new faith;
- They had left their homes and their occupations;
- They discovered that their community leaders rejected Jesus – and the religious leaders too.

But, we might say, “At least they still had Jesus. He should be enough for them!” But, in Jn 13, Jesus told them, “I am leaving too. I will soon die.” They must have been devastated when Jesus said that. I imagine that, at first, his words in **Jn 14:1** rang hollow to them when he said, “*Do not let your hearts be troubled.*”

What were they to do after everything seems to have gone wrong? Let’s look at two of their responses:

#1: Peter, “*The Take Charge Guy*” (13:36-14:3) *Lord, I will lay down my life for you!*”

Do you grasp the irony of Peter saying, “I will lay down my life for you!”? If Peter had died instead of Jesus, there would never be any eternal hope for Peter – much less for us. Do you think the impetuous and oft-wrong Peter could die so that your sins might be atoned for?

I wonder whether there wasn’t at least a trace of an understanding smile on Jesus’ face as he reflected this absurd statement back to Peter: “*Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you, Peter, before the cock crows you will fail -- you will disown me three times.*”

Even after spending three years with Jesus, Peter still had a hard lesson to learn. But, he would have to learn it if he would ever be usable by God. And all of us must learn it too. **To Eve, Peter and us: God doesn’t use those who have never failed -- or who think we’ve never failed, or pretend we’ve never failed.** Jesus doesn’t love us for what we can do for Him. He loves us in spite of the fact that we are weak and ragged. Jesus must die for us if we will have hope.

#2: **Thomas, "The Angry Agnostic"** -- *We don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?*

It's easy to be critical of Thomas's angry response when we read what he said in **Jn 14:5**. I imagine that the other disciples were all thinking what Thomas actually said -- but they were all afraid to say it.

Now, Thomas was wrong. Jesus had clearly told Thomas repeatedly where he was going, i.e., through death to the Father. And Jesus has explained clearly the way people can follow him to that place, i.e., through faith in him. But Thomas, at this point, had not grasped it.

Perhaps the worst part of Thomas's response was the blaming. Thomas blamed Jesus for the problems he was having. He said, "You didn't tell us well enough, Jesus. We thought you were going to set up your kingdom and now you talk about death. It's your fault we're struggling."

What did Jesus do? This is the part I'm most interested in. When I am feeling confused and angry like Thomas did, how does Jesus respond to me? I am gripped by what Jesus said in **14:6**: "*Thomas, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*"

Here's the point: Jesus didn't put Thomas down or cast him off. In fact, he spoke calmly but clearly in response to Thomas's angry and unbelieving accusation. It's clear to me that Jesus loved Thomas in spite of his anger. But, at the same time, Jesus's respect and compassion for Thomas did not keep him from speaking truthfully into Thomas's confusion. In fact, Thomas's honest but emotional outburst called forth one of the greatest statements in the Bible: "Thomas, you old Eyore, I know what you're feeling, but settle down and listen to me -- I am the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me."

This was probably not the answer Thomas wanted -- but it's the one he most needed. His deepest human need was salvation. So, Jesus said, "**This is why I was born. My upcoming death is my Father's eternal plan to offer you hope. Thomas, I know where I'm going. Because I am going, you can find the way to where I am going. I am your way!**" That is what Thomas most needed. It's what you and I need most too: We need the way back to God that was lost when Eve and Adam sinned.

Look one more time at what Jesus said to him. "I am the way," said Jesus, "no one comes to the Father but by me." Do you see it? Jesus substituted persons for places in his words. Instead of speaking of the Father's house, he now spoke of going to the Father. Instead of speaking of himself as a guide on that journey, he claimed personally to be the path to get there.

Here's what Jesus was saying to Thomas: "If you find it hard to think of heaven as a place, think of it as in terms of a person, a person you do know. Think of me. Think of heaven as being with me! Your problem, Thomas, isn't so much that you don't know the details, your problem is you don't yet really know me. Trust Me, Thomas, for I am the way to the Father."

This was a startling answer. "I am the way"-- spoken by one whose way was to be a cross, the way of death reserved for the worst of criminals. "I am the truth"--spoken by one not generally believed by his own people; one who would soon be condemned by lying witnesses. "I am the life"-- spoken by One whose dead corpse would soon be lying in a dark tomb with a government seal.

I've told you about this all-too-often in my 11+ years here at LAC – but I'll say it again. This is the text I was going to be preaching from when our 2nd child died. On the evening after she died, I read this passage of Scripture when I was feeling more hope-less than I had ever felt in my life. I read the words of Jesus saying, "You believe in God, Greg. Trust me. I know what I'm doing and I'm doing it for Brittany and I'm doing it for you and Chris. Trust me! Don't let your heart be troubled. Trust me." I had a decision to make, didn't I? And, through much of my own confusion, agony and tears, I chose to trust him. And, through faith in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus, I have found the hope my heart deeply needs.

And, this is not just true of my walk with God. I spoke with my daughter Heather about this last week and this is what she wrote me:

One of the biggest, most life- and faith-altering moments in my life was when Noelle developed grapefruit-sized mass on her ovary. She was only 4 years old and was in the hospital, in agony because we couldn't control the pain and had to rush her in for emergency surgery. My biggest fear in life is losing one of my kids. So, my natural response is usually one of terror. That evening, I sat alone in the waiting room, thinking that I could lose Noelle, and I asked myself, "You tell high schoolers they should trust God all the time. Do you really believe God is who he says he is?" And I realized that yes, I do. I chose to trust him. When I did, I found the hope I most needed knowing that, even if the worst happened, God would be who he is and do what he does. He would sustain us and lift us up. And, he did.

You see, when Jesus spoke these words to Peter and Thomas, the triumph was still to come. This way that Jesus would go would not be the way they, you and I go to the Father. We go through Jesus. His way is not our way. **He** is our way. Because Jesus was born and then went the way to the cross, he became the way back to God for us. Jesus defeated sin through his sinless life and his willingness to die in our place. He defeated death through his resurrection. I declare to you: Jesus is our hope!

So, to Eve, to Peter, to Thomas and to us the answer is clear: If Jesus had not been born, the head of the evil one and all the effects of sin in this world would not be crushed. This is why we need the manger. Jesus, out of love for us, was born. He lived. He died. He rose again! What Jesus offers to us in this often-hopeless world is himself. And what he says to you today if you feel you are in a hope-less situation is this: "*Don't let your heart be troubled. Neither, be afraid. I know what I'm doing, and I am doing it for you. Trust me.*"