Genesis 3:1-7, Mark 14:32-42

“In the Garden”

Welcome to the first Sunday in Lent. We had a very meaningful Ash Wednesday service last Wednesday evening. It is so important for us to have these types of opportunities to provide some sort of order and direction in the messiness of our lives. Lent is really a time to call ourselves to task. And I know that doesn’t come easy for me. I feel much more comfortable encouraging you and stoking the flames of excitement. It is so much easier hearing that we are good people and we are on the right track.

But that isn’t what Lent is about. We hear in Ecclesiastes that there is a time and a place for every season and this is the season to hear how we fall short of the glory of God. One would think that Advent with its upbeat message would eclipse the more somber Lent in traditional church attendance. But historically lent is a much higher attendance season. There is something in all of us that wants to hear the truth even if it isn’t comforting or pleasing or necessarily flattering to us.

Today, this first Sunday in lent we find ourselves geographically in both of our Scriptures in gardens. One is in a garden somewhere in Iraq and the other takes place in a garden in Jerusalem. What we find is that in both of these beautiful idyllic settings the most significant abandonment between us leaving God takes place.

With this backdrop in mind we have to come face to face with our shortcomings and, we hate to use this word, with our sin that has at its root a betrayal or an abandonment of God. We will see how important it is to claim our sin and then be freed to move in a different direction that leads us closer to God and not farther away.

**READ**

Since we aren’t sharing too many warm fuzzy stories today designed to make you laugh which then makes you vulnerable to some pointed teachings, I wanted to share with you one of my earliest and most difficult lessons as a pastor that relates to this theme of abandonment. When Stacy and I graduated from Princeton we served together in Italy and we lived in Naples in the orphanage where we worked. We lived on the bottom floor of the boys section of the orphanage.

Down the lane was the main villa and the girls lived there. Anna was a 14 year old girl who, like most of the kids in the orphanage, had had a disastrous childhood. Her father had abandoned her early on and was in jail. Her mom, well, you’ll hear about her mom soon enough. Every weekend the kids would go home to their parents and we dreaded these weekends. We knew they would be coming back to us having forgotten everything we were trying to teach them and having been exposed to situations that kids should not be exposed to.

One weekend right after Rachel we born I was driving home and I went through lovers lane that was a street where people parked for romantic reasons. I saw ahead of me Anna who was getting into the car of a grown man who was speaking to Anna’s mom and handing her some money. I knew what was taking place, and knowing our kids it didn’t surprise me that this was what Anna’s mom was doing with her during the weekend.

I spoke with Anna on Monday morning and she was able to say that her mom didn’t make her do that, she didn’t mind at all. When she was abandoned by her dad she felt like she needed something and when she prostituted herself that sense of abandonment left her. She didn’t say it in those words, but that’s what she said. I hope that wasn’t too raw. But when we are betrayed or abandoned, or when we betray or abandon others it leaves a whole wake of destruction all around us. This is especially the case when we abandon God as our Scripture indicates.

In the Garden of Eden we find played out our sin of abandonment in very clear terms. Some call it the original sin, but as Protestants let’s call it the sin that was a harbinger for things to come. Adam and Eve are given a specific command and one that seems fairly innocuous and easy to follow. But we turn against against that command and abandon God for the advice of the serpent who later has been interpreted by Milton as Satan. Ultimately our abandonment of God as Romans tells us leads to our being kicked out garden, hard work for men and hard labor for women, as well as eventual death for men and women alike.

The wages, the pay we received, the repercussion for our sins ultimately is mortality. I don’t think we often hear from behind this pulpit the gravity of our sin. We have maybe created in our minds a hierarchy of sin where the small ones don’t really count or God doesn’t really care about those small ones. Or, and this I hear all the time, we redefine sin with other words. If we don’t consider homosexuality a sin then we call it a loving relationship. If we don’t consider abortion a sin, then we call it a matter of ethical choice.

I remember when again we were at Casa Materna two workers had an affair and I remember speaking with the woman and she said I love God and he must have brought us together. I then gently asked her if adultery was part of the plan and she was so offended. We love each other, how can it be adultery? I said, because he is still married. We tend to have an uncanny ability to redefine sin in which we find ourselves participating as something different. It all goes back to abandoning God and His principles and directives.

The same can be true of churches. When we are confronted with our sin of inaction on our properties that we own, it can be easy to explain it away and point he finger at someone else. When we do not act in a missional and loving way, or when our properties become a stumbling block to others that is a sin. And we as a church have sinned and we need to make sure that we do differently from now on.

There are so many ways in which we can abandon God. The most poignant and direct example is found in the Gospel of Mark. The Garden of Gethsemane is on the Mount of Olives and we find it referred to as a place where Jesus and the disciples used to go often for peace and quiet. Remember we had said some weeks back that it is in the middle of a cemetery.

There are a number of details in these verses that point to how important of a time this is in the life of Christ. He takes his 3 favorite disciples with him to go off and pray and asks them to stay awake. Three times he goes off and he prays the same prayer. Father, take this cup away from me. You get the sense that Jesus has a growing fear that His own Father will abandon him. That’s right, I said fear. Can we say that Jesus was afraid? Or does that place an adjective on our Savior that doesn’t belong? It belongs. In verse 33 the Greek states that he was trembling, the type of trembling you would have when you tremble with fear. In vs. 34 he tells the disciples that literally he was afraid nearly to the point of death. There is no doubt that Jesus was afraid. He needed his favorite disciple to be with him.

That fear is reflected again on the cross as Jesus says my God, my God why have you forsaken me? But I have my 3 friends with me who will back me up and help me and on whom I can lean. Can’t you guys just stay awake with me during the most difficult time in my life? I know some of you have felt abandoned by this church as you were going through a difficult time in your life over these past few years and nobody reached out to you.

I hate to take us from the lush, green, peaceful garden of hope and enthusiasm that we have been experiencing here to the reality of our being betrayers. I like the garden better, it smells better, it is warm and cozy. But we have betrayed our Savior. Each one of us.

The empty cross signifies for us our betrayal and it is a constant reminder. The purple draped on it during lent draws attention to it once again that this instrument of torture took the life of our Savior because of our personal, continual betrayal.

As Protestants, there is another reason why the cross is empty. We all need to leave this sanctuary today knowing that you don’t have to go through life, or this season, or this week trembling with fear because you are unsure of your salvation. The empty cross reminds us that Jesus’ death paid the ultimate price so we can go through life with confidence. The cross is empty because our sins are gone.

But wait. It is so easy for us to say that your sins are forgiven and then you carry on with your life as if nothing happened and you continue in your sin. As the adulterous woman was brought to Jesus he did not condemn her but he did tell her, go and sin no more.

We have betrayed God and we continue to. Brothers and sisters, see how we have abandoned our Savior. Confess you sins and then go sin no more. Change your life, and then go in confidence of your forgiveness.