

April 15, 2012

Genesis 2:8-25  
Romans 5:12-19

## JESUS & ADAM

We never get clear enough or accurate enough in our picture of who Jesus was and what He was like. So for several months now we have been revisiting our opinions and impressions of Jesus. Some of us are doing that all the time. As we grow and our experience expands, we get more understanding of life, of ourselves, and sometimes of Jesus. Like with any living relationship, it is never finished, never solved, and never to be taken for granted.

Today begins a new series of sermons within our attempts to understand Jesus better. I call this series “The Flossing Sermons.” Nobody particularly likes them, but they are good for you. These sermons will attempt to locate Jesus more clearly in the context of the traditions and the famous people who shaped His consciousness, His expectations, and His understanding of what life is really about and what kind of person He wanted to be.

Most of us would agree that Jesus’ prayer life ended up trumping and expanding everything He received from His Jewish heritage. But this Jewish heritage was still the foundation of everything Jesus did and said, no matter how much He was breaking beyond it. So I will be suggesting that Jesus had role models in the heroes of Judaism, and that He learned from them and patterned His own life from what He found most valuable from each of them.

I hope we will all come away from this exploration with increased understanding and respect for the links – the connections – between the Old Testament and the New Testament. I have often commented that it is impossible to understand Jesus’ story without knowing the context out of which it came. It is impossible to comprehend the New Testament without knowing the Old Testament. It is impossible to appreciate the Gospel if we do not know the Law. I still run into many Christians who do not seem to know this. Some of them are sweet people, but their understanding of the issues and pressures surrounding Jesus’ life is shallow enough to distort everything. Their views of the issues and pressures facing the early church are even flimsier. That is not the sort of perspective we would wish for anybody in *The New Church*.

I am aware that there are those who prefer to picture Jesus as so divine that He did not have to wrestle with any of the human origins that the rest of us wrestle with. Being the Son of God, they say, Jesus was born knowing all truth. He did not have to learn from anybody, and He was not particularly influenced by the Jewish heritage from which He came. It's interesting to me that people who hold such theories almost invariably know little or nothing about Jesus' life. And according to their logic, there was no point to Jesus' being born here in the first place; we should just skip straight to Pentecost. Except then we have no idea whatsoever of what kind of Spirit the Holy Spirit is.

Back to reality: We all have "family of origin" issues. And "family of origin" includes the traditions and expectations of the society into which we were born. If Jesus was born as a human being into this world – as Christianity insists – then He has "family of origin" issues too. How else can we explain His remark that "*a man's foes will be those of his own household*"? (Matthew 10:36)

It is also clear in the New Testament records that Jesus knew the Old Testament as thoroughly as any person of His time. We meet Jesus, apart from a few tacked-on legends, as a grown man of around the age of thirty. We do not know any significant information about Jesus' formative years. Was He a studious recluse? Was He the life of the party with His teenage friends? Did He have any girlfriends? Did He work in His father's carpenter shop from an early age? Did He ever get drunk? Was He always a model son and citizen? Did He ever get in fights? Did He have close friends? Was He a healer even as a boy or a young man? Lots of people have opinions about such things, but all of them are based on inference drawn from assumptions we make from His later life. None of it is based on solid information because we have no information.

Jesus was the son of Mary and Joseph. His father was a carpenter. He had five brothers and several sisters. He grew up in Nazareth. That is about all we know from the New Testament records. Except we also know that fully grown, at age thirty, Jesus was already beyond all normal expectations and comprehensions. We know this in many deep and profound ways. But even on the surface of life, we know this because in approximately three years – without ever leaving the backwater, insignificant, powerless little territory of Palestine on the fringe of the Roman Empire – Jesus changed the history of the entire world. That is not theory or opinion. That is fact.

Many forces continue their efforts to undo what Jesus set in motion. That is now the “name of the game” here on earth. Some notice; some do not. How long has it been since we celebrated Easter? Or understood Palm Sunday, or Good Friday? Well, enough introduction. We better get on with the new series before we run out of time. Not that this would be a great tragedy. We never really know when we will run out of time. It may have happened already.

So here we go: I am convinced that Jesus did not realize His own identity or destiny until after His own baptism – His own conversion. Doubtless the Spirit of God had been nibbling at His consciousness – crowding Him, trying to awaken Him – for years. John the Baptist was His spiritual mentor, and the catalyst. In any case, Jesus did not live into His identity and role as Messiah by accident, or automatically, or by following some prearranged script. Jesus grew up in a devout Jewish home. Clearly, somewhere along the line He had studied the Old Testament more thoroughly and deeply than His peers. I have long suspected that some skeptical, deeply devout but irascible old Rabbi – who had perhaps run afoul of the religious establishment – had been drawn to Jesus and spent a lot of time tutoring Him.

In any case, Jesus was exceedingly well-versed in the Torah, and in the issues and arguments which surrounded it. Torah itself requires that a devout Jew meditate on it day and night. Subsequent arguments with scribes and priests made it clear that this was exactly what Jesus had done. Scribes and Pharisees (experts in the Law) were no match for Jesus when it came to debating the Scriptures. Jesus had huge regard and admiration for the prophets and, I suspect, for all the heroes of His Jewish tradition. Jesus not only knew the stories, He had contemplated them in great depth. How else could He have known how to wend His way through all the pressures and demands of His own time, shaping His own movement in such a dramatically different fashion? Zealots, Pharisees, Essenes, Sadducees, John’s followers – along the way, all wanted Jesus to come into *their* organizations. But Jesus would not fit Himself into any of them. Am I the only one who finds this fascinating?

Jesus knew, for instance, the history of the Maccabees. They were still as revered and honored in Jesus’ time as World War II heroes are honored in our time. But Jesus had realized that the approach used by the Maccabees could never work in the long run. Most of the Jewish patriots, and even the common people of Jesus’ time, did not know this. Jews who looked forward to the coming of the Messiah still assumed that

the true Messiah would fit this pattern and finish what the Maccabees had started.

Jesus knew the entire history of Israel, and He picked from it what He thought was most valuable and shaped it into a New Covenant – a New Way. This is not merely a theory, or a later notion tacked on to His story. Jesus names this New Covenant at the Last Supper: “*This is the New Covenant in my blood.*” Is He making anything up from scratch? No, He takes this piece from Jeremiah, the greatest prophet of prayer in the Old Testament. None of this explains Jesus; His life and ministry and identity are more and greater than a patchwork quilt. But without this backdrop, the rest of His story has no rhyme or reason to it – no connection to our world.

So I want to talk briefly about Jesus’ connection to some of His heroes. I will try to give a brief biographical sketch of each and talk a bit about the way some of the themes in the lives of these heroes show up in Jesus’ life, and then hope that you will go on seeing far greater connections between the Old and New Testament stories than you have before.

Adam is the first, and most questionable, connection. But Adam serves as an introduction to the rest, so I will start there. Adam is not an individual person. Adam is all “mankind.” That is the meaning of the Hebrew word *adam*. Adam is all of us – and each of us. We are all built like and respond like Adam. It’s not that Adam made a mistake and we all suffer because of it, though that’s how some people make it sound. Adam is us, and we are Adam. Adam represents the pride, disobedience, and rebelliousness that all of us demonstrate in our own lives. We do not get blamed for what Adam did; Adam is who we are too. So how do I do a biographical sketch of an archetype? Sadly, there are some ways in which I can.

Clearly the story of Adam is myth, not history. As such, it sets the scene for all that is to come. As Christians understand the story of Adam, Jesus comes to set right what Adam (all of us) makes wrong. As myth – that is, as the deep spiritual truth of all creation – Adam is the problem and Jesus is the solution. Paul talks about this rather directly in the fifth chapter of Romans. People who don’t want to connect the Old Testament with the New Testament know the solution but not the problem. They know the answer but not the question. The trouble is, if you know the answer but not the question, in actual fact you know nothing. A solution without a problem is a useless piece of trivia.

Some of us have our own special wording and ways to approach the story of Adam. People have been arguing over the true significance of “The Fall” for a great many years now – well, for over four thousand years at least. We don’t have time for all the niceties this morning, just some of the simplest and most basic parts of this “biography.”

Adam starts out in an idyllic setting, without a worry in the world. He doesn’t really appreciate his circumstances – he doesn’t realize what a special thing it is that all his physical needs are taken care of. His bliss is not earned or valued. He does not appreciate it because he has nothing to compare it with. He is, in the deepest sense of the word, “innocent.” How long can you live in this world and stay innocent? We have different experiences, but all of us are Adam, and the answer is: not for very long.

Whatever the temptation, whatever the snake, whatever the wound or betrayal or loss or abuse, the answer is: We cannot stay innocent for very long. We begin to realize that some things are good and pleasant, and other things are painful and evil. The veil of innocence falls from our eyes and we become aware of the battle between good and evil that rages everywhere in our world – inside and out. *“The fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”* is a powerful symbol with endless dimensions, but we will keep it simple and basic this morning.

Adam is soon out of the Garden of Eden. Some say he is “kicked out,” but I suspect he doesn’t have to move an inch. When we lose our innocence, nothing around us looks the same ever again. Even if Adam is still in the Garden, it doesn’t look or seem like a Garden anymore. Everything is frightening. Everything is a problem. Where is the next meal coming from? Or maybe he himself is the next meal. How do you keep warm? Where can you sleep and still be safe? All the animals are starting to seem unfriendly. Eve has developed headaches and a long list of complaints, and she thinks everything needs fixing. After all, she is now just as frightened as we are today. Kids are wonderful, but they bring a whole new set of nightmares: You have to feed them and try to keep them safe. But what if they get hurt? What if they don’t grow up with the right values and habits? Adam is overwhelmed with his fears, his responsibilities, his opportunities – any of which can suddenly turn on him and leave him worse off than he was before.

Adam is out of the Garden. His life is circumscribed by all the things that can go wrong. He tries not to let this get him down. He tries to pretend he has everything under control. But these fears are real and

do not go away. So Adam tries to choose the good and protect himself against the evil. That is what it means to be Adam – the natural man. As such, Adam is estranged from all the sources and resources of life. He doesn't mean to be, but that is what fear does to us. He is estranged, suspicious, alienated. The ancient word for this is SIN. He tries to get enough control to be able to acquire more of the good and hold off some of the evil – from himself and all the people he cares about. He works very hard, but that also puts him into competition, jealousy, more estrangement – one way or the other. Sometimes Adam gets some appreciation for all his labors, but mostly that is short-lived, mixed with other feelings, or balanced out by all the criticism and accusations he gets as well. (Are you recognizing any of this?) Usually – we *could* say always – Adam's good efforts are mixed with mistakes, blunders, careless moments. Some of them hurt others. Some of them stay in his memory to mar all the good efforts he makes. But Adam is so busy with his desires and his problems that he no longer has time for God. That is truly what it means to be kicked out of the Garden.

The most profound thing about Adam is that his life is surrounded and circumscribed by what are called “the curses.” There is misunderstanding and animosity between Adam and God, between Adam and nature, between Adam and Eve, between Adam and his neighbors, between Adam and himself. On the individual level, this is struggle, sorrow, pain, guilt, and depression. On the collective level, it is war, poverty, tyranny and oppression, ecological disaster, and racial strife. And sometimes it gets so subtle or so familiar that we don't even realize we are all drowning in it. Then it breaks out in full ugliness somewhere and we all act as if it were something unusual, something unexpected, something unfair and unjust. “What did we ever do to deserve this? Life is supposed to be good and kind to us.” “What could the parents have been thinking?” “It must have been the influence of bad television.” We act like we have never even heard of Adam, or Cain and Abel, or even Noah. Life is supposed to be good and fair, and all this trouble is terribly unjust and unfair. “Nobody knows the trouble I've seen.” But that is not the truth. The truth is, everybody knows this trouble. And not just in theory, but for themselves.

Adam is the Natural Man. He lives with the curses. He doesn't mean to be bad; he doesn't intend to do so much damage. Often he works hard and tries hard, but the greater his efforts, the more it all keeps turning against him – because his condition, his context, his

situation is alienation. He tries to do it his own way, and by himself. I mean, in “alienation,” who do you trust? So the more he strives, the deeper the hole he digs. All of us are Adam. Adam is all of us. *Adam* in Hebrew means “mankind.” Adam is *our* story. Adam is not an individual who lived long ago. Adam is us.

Jesus starts out being Adam too. If not, He has no meaningful connection to me – He has no relevance to my life. Jesus knows the story of Adam and ponders it more deeply than anyone ever did before He came along. And eventually Jesus “mutates” (wrong word, but we need the jolt) – He transcends, converts – from Natural Man to Spiritual Man. Not in or by His own power, let us be clear; *the dove descends* – by the *Spirit’s* power. But Jesus responds – He turns back to God – deeply and totally. Jesus starts to see all the history of His people through new eyes that realize that Adam’s way cannot work – not ever! Adam’s way is not going to be any better tomorrow or next year than it is today. Adam’s way cannot work – not ever! Most people on earth still do not know this.

No matter how well Adam (us) may do it in his best moments: You cannot obey Torah and have it come out right in the long run, if you are still the Natural Man. You cannot love your neighbor and have it come out right, if you are still the Natural Man. You cannot fight evil and have it come out right, if you are still the Natural Man. You cannot have a life full of love and hope and joy, if deep inside you think you are awful, that God hates you, that soon you will be punished or destroyed. Even total devotion – total allegiance to God – will still invert on you, revert on you, and turn against you, if you are still the Natural Man. The Natural Man seeks success and survival. The Natural Man has to compete with, and if necessary defeat or destroy, whatever threatens his success and survival. Is that not natural? It is the way of the world.

“*Blessed are the poor in spirit*” – those who know their absolute need of God. Turn will and life over to God – stop trying to run life your own way. Take all of your ambitions and values out of this natural realm. So Jesus, unlike many of His followers, has no prejudices against the poor *or* the rich. That would only be the Natural Man in reverse. He does not have to win here, not in any of the ways we normally care about. He does not see people in terms of the plots or subplots of the Natural World and its curses. He sees them as children of God, yet hurt and in bondage to Sin, Death, and the Devil. Jesus is no longer the Natural Man. He sees everything differently. All His goals and values and methods

and efforts are bent in a new direction: Peace with God. Trust in God. Unheard of! Unbelievable! So unnatural. It can never work here. In many ways it doesn't.

Clearly it would have taken a theophany – a major religious experience, a conversion – to make the interior changes to support the outer convictions that Jesus demonstrates and reveals in His earthly ministry. The story of Adam is the great “stuck place” of all human life. Jesus breaks beyond it. He doesn't just change the rules; He ignores the rules – He lives far beyond them. He has a very different relationship with God that has nothing to do with the rules. It has to do with God's love for us. It ends up changing all perspective on who God is, who Jesus is, who *we* are, what life is about, what is truly valuable, and what methods and approaches are useful in pursuing our true goals. And those are only the *words* we use. They cannot begin to explain the *feelings*, the experiences, the convictions, and the awareness that go with this transformation.

Nobody can contemplate the connections between Jesus and Adam for very long without noticing the two Gardens: Eden and Gethsemane. How do we fully comprehend the New Testament Garden if we do not know the Old Testament Garden? How far is it from Eden to Gethsemane? All life on earth is a wandering between these two Gardens.

Eden is paradise, but mindless. If you have not eaten of the tree of knowledge, you don't have any knowledge yet. What we do without conscious choice is meaningless and without purpose. We get kicked out of this Garden, forced by pain and reality to see the problem of good and evil. So we take responsibility. Some say that despite being kicked out of Eden – in honor of how nice it was there – we try to stay as mindless and unaware as we can, as much of the time as we can. I guess that really isn't very strange. The reality beyond innocence is too much to handle undiluted. One of the surprising discoveries for me was the realization that you don't have to drink to go through life in a stupor. I still meet lots of people more asleep sober than I ever was drunk. But I do understand. Sobriety is really tough without a painkiller. It is especially difficult if you have any compassion for other people. Only, being a drunk isn't all that easy either. So if you don't have to play God anymore, it *is* possible to slow down and breathe deeply enough to stay sober without any painkillers. Of course, it's better if you know and trust God again.

But how far is it from Eden to Gethsemane? Nobody can say for sure, yet the day came when Jesus walked into that other Garden. There was a tree in the Garden of Gethsemane too: the tree of the knowledge of God's Kingdom first. *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your mind, and with all your soul, and with all your strength – and him only shall you serve."* We already had the words, but they do not work from East of Eden – not with us still in control and still scared half to death. Willpower is not enough if we are still caught in the Alienation Syndrome – if we are still slaves of SIN.

I know that some people want to think that Jesus was never kicked out of Eden. "Let's stick with tooth fairies and virgin births and pastel shades," they say, "and anything to warm the heart, whether it has any meaning or reality or not." *Nobody* ever travels from Eden to Gethsemane by accident, or innocent of the issues, or unaware of what is at stake. Eden is paradise, but mindless. Gethsemane is temptation – the ultimate testing – but in total awareness. In Eden, there is no choice. In Gethsemane, choice is the only thing there is.

So Jesus chose – not just in that moment, but He chose *once again* – according to all He had tracked and known and become since His baptism, the awakening: the New LIFE with God. Jesus chose to obey God, against all odds – against all the pressures in or out of this world – but nevertheless because He *wanted* to. No law could require it. No law could even support it. No fear of God could have been motive enough. No coercion can exist in Gethsemane. The choice was as willful as Adam's, only this time it came in full conscious awareness: *"Nevertheless, not my will but YOUR will be done."* Eden is an innocent, willful, self-centered reaction: I want what I want when I want it. Gethsemane is totally conscious and totally willful, yet it wills a willing obedience to God. It turns life and will over to God on purpose.

"Lord God, my will bows to Your will."  
Not good enough.

"Lord God, Your will has become my will."  
Not true enough.

"Lord God, above all things – all earthly realities,  
all truth and fear and death – I love and I trust YOU."  
That puts God back in first place. There is no other  
appropriate place for the true God.

The two Gardens stand at either end of the full spectrum of LIFE: from rebellion to reconciliation; from instinct to conscious responsibility; from Natural Man to Spiritual Man. To go from Eden to Gethsemane is to go from fear to faith, from innocence to self-awareness, from pride to humility, from Law to LOVE. And most of all, it is a choosing: a choice to let God be our God again.

Gethsemane is a long way from Eden, as far from Eden as we can ever go. Often (perhaps even always), finding ourselves in Gethsemane is the only way out of the curses and into healing – and back to God. How far is it from Eden to Gethsemane? In our world, it can sometimes seem strange that anybody would ever want to follow Jesus. Clearly most of the human race does not want to take this journey. At least not all together, at the same time.

Therein lies another huge misunderstanding, don't you think? So many people seem to think that it is our job to make Christianity sound simple and appealing enough to attract everybody. They say that is the essence of evangelism. And if we don't do this, there is something wrong with us – we are not being really faithful. But that isn't even close to Jesus' own approach. Christianity is open to everybody, but clearly not everybody wants it. And some who do not want it today will change their minds later on. Nevertheless, Christianity is never to be forced on anybody. It does not and cannot work that way. Nobody can choose Christianity for somebody else. Christianity is not for the people who *need* it. Christianity is for the people who *want* it. Christianity is for the people who choose it: who choose Jesus. We never know for sure who, or when. Perhaps it is for somebody like you.