

Sermon at St. Thomas by Lynn E Cunningham. February 10, 2008. Lent I. Genesis 2:15-15, 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11.

- 1. With this first Sunday in Lent, St. Thomas is starting a Lenten preaching series on the Baptismal Covenant. Each preacher during Lent will address a particular part of the Baptismal Covenant. Most of the covenant tracks the elements of the Nicene Creed.**
- 2. Following each service, the congregation will be invited to stay for a while, perhaps half an hour, to share reflections on the sermon, on the portion of the Baptismal Covenant addressed that day, and on the lessons. So, if something I say today in the sermon or in the lessons, catches your particular attention, you will have a chance to share your thoughts with other members of the congregation right after the service.**
- 3. We are undertaking this series, and this joint reflection, since it is a part of the discipline of Lent to engage in reading and meditating on God's holy word, as the Ash Wednesday service instructs. All major denominations encourage this form of reflection, particularly during the season of Lent.**
- 4. The Baptismal Covenant is found on page 304 of the Book of Common Prayer in the baptismal service. Today I address the opening question: "Do you believe in God the Father?" To which the people are invited to respond: "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth." p. 304.**
- 5. Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury, notes in his book which the adult study class read this past fall, that the phrase, 'I believe', is perhaps better translated from the Greek as, 'I trust'. The aspect of God that is referred to here, the God the Father, is someone who can be trusted to do certain things, who can be trusted to be a certain way. Loving, present, challenging, creating, like a parent, like a father.**
- 6. Let me note that over the next two Sundays, Mary Ellen will be talking about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and then the following Sunday, I will speak about God the Holy Spirit.**
- 7. The three scriptures assigned for today show characteristics of the God that Christians have come to know and trust. Let's look at some of what scripture show about God the Father.**
- 8. God in Genesis is very much a creating God. Genesis affirms that God makes heaven and earth. God makes the plants, the trees, the dust in which the plants grow, and the rain to water them. In today's passage in particular, God forms Adam out of the dust of the earth. What you and I are, God has made. God breathes into Adam's nostrils the breath of life. Genesis shows a God who is not at all remote from the world which human beings live in.**
- 9. And this same creating God teaches Adam about what is right, by warning him never to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Genesis show that this is a God who cares deeply about the actions of his human creatures.**
- 10. A reflection on your part might be here, does the God whom I worship behave like this?**
- 11. In the letter to the Romans, Paul has this long and, to me, somewhat confusing, metaphorical passage about how sin came into the world through Adam, and how God's gift of the Christ took away the sin of the world, through the free gift of abounding grace. God the Father, for Paul, is not someone who ignores human beings' sinful state, but rather actively intervenes in the world to bring human beings into a state of grace through His Son, Jesus Christ.**
- 12. Can you see the intimacy and connection expressed in this passage from Romans, between God and God's people? Does the God whom you worship have this**

- intimacy and connection with your own life?
13. **The passage from Matthew's Gospel narrates Jesus' sojourn of forty days in the wilderness, where Jesus is tempted in three different ways by Satan.**
 14. **The passage contains one of the two or three most amusing passages in the Gospels. It says that Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness, and afterwards he was famished. O! No kidding! If you and I were to fast for the forty days of Lent, we too would be pretty famished. Good thing we had the big meal on Taco Tuesday, to fortify for the long fast!**
 15. **Jesus in this passage reveals wonderful things about God. First, Satan addresses Jesus with the name of Son of God. So, even in this story which is early in the Gospel, God's presence to the world through God's Son is recognized.**
 - a. **Second, Jesus says that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. In other words, Jesus affirms that our very existence moment by moment is undergirded by the word of God filtering through our lives.**
 - b. **Third, Jesus reminds Satan, of the teaching from the Torah, not to put the Lord your God to the test. What does that mean?**
 - c. **People sometimes find themselves in dicey, difficult situations, and try to ask God to solve the situation in ways that they want to choose or define. As if, God were a just a miracle worker standing by to solve every problem people have. I believe that God does stand by us always, but God solves our problems in ways that God sends forth, and these are not usually in the ways that the person is expecting. God is not the magician standing by with a bag of tricks to solve my problems in the way I want them solved. God is the sovereign creator of the world, who solves problems according to God's will. For a person to ask God to solve that person's problems according to that person's view of things, is to put God to the test. It cannot and should not be done, and Jesus says so.**
 - d. **Fourth, and finally, Satan asks Jesus to worship him and in payment, Satan says he will give Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. What a deal? Think of all the international issue you could solve if you ruled all the kingdoms of the world. Jesus refuses, on the ground that only God is to be worshiped, only God should be served. For a person to tie his or her success and worldly wealth to anything less than the creative power of the sovereign Creator of the universe, is idolatry, pure and simple. Jesus knows to stay away from it. And we can learn something about God from this exchange as well. God is so fundamental to reality that nothing in the world is worth worshiping and serving, except only God.**
 16. **And that lesson, in turn, might challenge each of us to ask, what or who are we worshiping and serving in our own minds? Is it the full sovereign creator of the universe, or is it something less?**
 17. **To go back to the opening portion of the baptismal covenant, each Christian is challenged with the question, do you believe in God the Father, creator of heaven and earth? And by implication, a follow on question is, or are you entangled in trusting in some lesser power? Are you putting your hope in something more temporary, and partial than the fullness of God the creator?**
 18. **This is the opening question of the baptismal examination, because this question serves to undergird and support all the other questions. How hard it will be to trust in Jesus and in the work of the Holy Spirit, if, in your heart, you are trusting anything less to see you through life, anything less than God the sovereign creator of the world.**
 19. **Most human beings form at a very early age an image of what God is and what**

- God is like, and whether God can be trusted or not. Or if a child feels that the world is a fearful and dangerous place, perhaps that child begins to think of God as a fearful and dangerous being.**
- 20. Indeed in the Ash Wednesday service, and in psalm that we read for today, God the Father is portrayed as needing to be forgiving towards his wickedly sinful children.**
 - 21. So one question you might want to reflect on during Lent, and during the sharing time after this service, is, what kind of image of God the Father dominates in you or for you? And why? Do you think of God as a punishing and vengeful being, or is God for you mainly creating and forgiving? What image of God do you carry around in your spirit?**
 - 22. Last Sunday I preached on Paul's teachings having to do with putting on the mind of Christ. Paul's life, you may recall, had been transformed when his youthful religion of a very rules-oriented Judaism was broken open by Christ. He began to write of his efforts to put on the mind of Christ by seeing God as an entity who encouraged freedom. At one point he writes, for freedom, Christ has set us free. He wrote how he struggled to remake the way his mind worked in order to come to see the world and those around him through the eyes of Christ, rather than through his own limited, and perhaps judgmental way of thinking.**
 - 23. This first opening question of the Baptismal Covenant, then, immediately challenges the Christian, to consider what kind of person is God the Father. And the response stresses, God the Father is the creator of heaven and earth.**
 - 24. So, I invite you in the discussion time following the service today, to share with others in the congregation your own thoughts and reflections about how you find yourself thinking about God the Father, and how your image of that person relates to the accounts of God the Father that we find in the Baptismal Covenant, and in the scriptures read for today.**
 - 25. For those of you who cannot stay, I hope you take some of your prayer and reflection time this week, to examine your own understanding of God in light of these scriptures. The Holy Spirit is always active to bring every one of us closer to God in this life.**
 - 26. In Jesus name, Amen.**