

“Fig Leaves” / Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 / 9 March 2014 / First Sunday in Lent

Ah, that talking snake! He has surfaced at last, this crafty serpent whose story almost everyone knows, even the least biblically literate soul in the land. In fact, the opening credits of the old TV series *Desperate Housewives* began with an image of Adam and Eve with the serpent. When people marvel that I'm a minister, the question eventually arises: Do you really believe in talking snakes? And yet, the snake is little more than a prop in this parable about the loss of innocence. The true gist of this ancient story is that knowledge comes at great price. Today, on this first Sunday of Lent, a season of soul-searching and introspection as we journey with Jesus toward the cross, what is the price of knowledge for you and me? Sacrifice! Knowledge demands sacrifice.

One day around Christmastime, not so very long ago, a certain pastor went to check the church mailbox. Everything in the mail that day appeared to be a Christmas card, but upon opening one of the pastel-colored envelopes, the pastor stopped short, shocked by what he read. There in a regular old seasonal greeting card was the ugliest (indeed the only) piece of hate mail he had ever read. It began nicely enough with a note directed to the pastor himself. “Dear reverend, please deliver this message to your parishioner, Mr. So-and-So. His wife reads all his mail, so I must send it by way of you. I know that you're a good man, and if Mr. So-and-So followed your wise counsel instead of sitting out in your congregation like the scoundrel hypocrite that he is, everyone would be happier.” Or something to that effect. The rest of the letter was filled with the vilest accusations against the parishioner. He had put a child in harm's way. He had embezzled public funds. He had intentionally misused his office. He had used his high station in society to personal advantage. There was name-calling, and defamation, and all the accusations were laid out in lurid detail, but there were never any threats.

The minister was new to that parish and relatively young. He lacked all experience with hate mail. But since the letter contained no threats, he quietly stuck it in a file to be produced later if any harm should ever befall the parishioner in question. And then, the following December, lo and behold, another Christmas hate card arrived to make the file folder just a little bit fatter. And the next year another, then another. But because he didn't want to upset the man or his family, the pastor never delivered the letters to the person in question.

One year, finally, the contents of that annual letter were especially disturbing. It alleged that the church member's wife was having an affair. It contained painfully precise details, with names, and dates, and locations. The young pastor was deeply troubled; this time the details were so exact that he felt pretty sure that the hate-mailer was speaking a cruel truth. He decided to go to the police. But just as he was dialing the phone he had a second thought: Why not call the wise old pastor who served as general presbyter—the closest thing we Presbyterians have to bishops? So he called the presbytery office and described the situation to his older colleague, and asked what he should do. The man was silent for a long time, then at last he said. “Don't go to the police; that would make it all go public. Shred the letters and never mention them again. Your parishioner might already know about the affair. Maybe he's just not ready to deal with it yet; maybe he's hoping that he won't have to deal with it at all. But if you tell him about it, he'll be forced to act. Some people don't want their suspicions to be proven true; they need to live as if they don't know.”

Knowledge never comes cheap. Sometimes we'd prefer not to possess the bit of information that forces our hand, despite the wishes of our heart. Sometimes knowledge trades itself for feelings of joy, or anger, or shame, but mostly it comes with responsibility. Knowledge always becomes an obligation to act. Truly, if you were going to die a year from today, would you want to know beforehand, or would it be better to go on living happily unawares? If someone you loved were keeping a secret that would never hurt you unless you found out about it, would you insist on knowing all the same? In some instances, ignorance is bliss. What is it about knowledge that strips away our innocence, that sends us running like Eve and Adam to the fig trees to fashion ersatz loincloths from the leaves?

“Yada, yada, yada.” You’ve heard that dismissive term all your life, “yada, yada,” but you may not have been aware that “yada” is the Hebrew word for “to know.” “Yada, yada” actually means, “I know, I know.” “Yada” is a word that looms large in this well-known reading from the Book of Genesis, a story commonly known as “The Fall of Man.” You’ll notice that the fruit in the story isn’t necessarily an apple, as most people think. (I’d find a mango a lot more tempting anyway.) But though we call this text “The Fall of Man,” the word “sin” doesn’t appear in it, nor do the words “guilt” or “fall.” Of course, painters, and musicians, and theologians have all conspired to pinpoint this story as the very beginning of humanity’s great misery, the root of all that’s wrong with the world, humanity’s original sin. Without dismissing 1,600 years of Christian tradition, I wonder if there’s not another way to read this text? For though the words sin, and fall are not central here, the word “yada” is. You see, this story can be seen not only as some big, cosmic event that separated humanity from its Creator, but it can also be seen as a parable for something that happens to each and every of us, once in a lifetime: the loss of innocence that comes with the advent of knowledge in our minds. Just as when Adam and Eve eat forbidden fruit and became awkwardly aware of their own nakedness, so you and I reach a point in life—quite early on—when we no longer pull the wet pacifier from our own lips to offer it to passersby. There comes a day, quite early on, when everything is “mine, mine.” We become self-aware: we realize that I am me, and you are you, that I must protect my own, possibly even from you. Time visits us with the new, protective knowledge that I must look out for myself. New knowledge breaks in upon us, dispelling our pleasant illusions, coming to us only at great cost to our innocence and even our happiness. And if that loss cannot be described as “The Fall of Man...and Woman,” then what can?

Knowledge comes at a price. Somewhere in the countryside surrounding our city, there lives a cat whose thirst for knowledge is insatiable. Open a dresser drawer, and that cat will do everything in its power to jump into the drawer before you can close it. She just has to know what’s inside. Open a cupboard door, and by the time you close it, that cat will have made its way inside with lightning speed to investigate the contents. It just has to know everything. If her endless quest for knowledge ever takes her outside the house where she lives, there are plenty of mean old strays who will teach her the ways of the world. But that’s a risk she’s willing to take. As it is, this animal—which came from the pet store in perfect condition—already has a crooked tail from inserting herself into a doorway where she didn’t belong, and where no one saw her dodging in at the speed of light but not fast enough, for her elegant gray tail is now bent for getting slammed in the door. Even a cat slides down the same long slope with Eve, and you, and me. Even a cat takes risks for the sake of knowledge. And like that cat, we sometimes get our tails bent for all our need-to-know.

On the other hand, though, knowledge comes at a price, and if the price is high, we might find it easier to bury our heads in the sand, live without the knowledge...or at least pretend to. If I know that my lifestyle contributes to the certainty of ecological disaster, then I have to alter the way I live. But that’s hard, and no one likes to change. I can hide from my painful knowledge by listening to those who assure me that it’s not true. Either way, I must either “own” my hard knowledge—paying the price for owning it, making sacrifices—or else I must deny it. If I know that my inexpensive-but-stylish shoes are made by an eleven-year-old child in a sweat-shop in Lahore, Pakistan, then I have to start paying closer attention to the things I buy, usually paying a lot more money, too, for things that are manufactured responsibly...which is the sacrifice that knowledge demands. Hiding from our sure and certain knowledge costs less of us in the short term...and more in the long run. Look at Adam and Eve with their guilty knowledge! They make undergarments out of fig leaves in order to hide their knowledge about the thing they don’t want to know. But the very thing they use to hide their knowledge announces it! We can never un-know a thing we’ve known. We cannot escape its eventual price.

A boy was looking through the big family Bible in his grandparents’ parlor. His parents weren’t really churchgoers, so it was all fascinating to him. He stared long at the old illustrations of biblical

scenes: Moses at the Red Sea, Jesus walking on water, the seven-headed dragon in the Book of Revelation. And as he explored the ancient texts, he read them with rapt attention. Flipping through the big book, he came across an old autumn leaf that had been pressed between its pages. He held it up to his grandfather and said, "Look what I found!" "What is it?" his grandfather asked. The boy replied, "I'm pretty sure it's Adam's suit!" (Jokes about Adam and Eve are plentiful on the Internet, but most of them can't be repeated in church.) Ah, those fig leaves, those intentional distractions that are meant to look innocent, but which actually proclaim our guilt! A fig leaf is anything we use to hide our knowledge from ourselves and others. Looking the other way when others are treated unjustly, looking past real faults in our own lives or the lives of those we love, denying our own share of blame for the sorrows of the world. Fig leaves benefit no one. They're a silly attempt to escape responsibility. In fact, I believe that most misused word in the English Language is the word "connive." To connive isn't to scheme; it's to know something that you don't want to know, then to turn a blind eye to the harm being done to another, to ignore the bruises, to overlook the signs, to protect oneself by pretending not to see the suffering of another. It's a fig leaf.

Responsibility follows knowledge just as surely as potholes follow Christmas, as surely as birdsong follows the first warm day in February, as surely as daffodils follow after that. When you "own" your knowledge, when you don't attempt to hide behind fig leaves that fool no one, then you must embrace its call to action, the true responsibility that your knowledge entails. Knowledge equals sacrifice. Have you ever noticed that every pew in this room is labeled with one of three abstract nouns? Look at the ends of the pews; they have words on them, in the stylized architectural writing of the 1960s. The pew in which you're sitting is either marked with the word "worship," "service," or "knowledge." My guess is that these three things were especially important to the founders of our church. Why not "desire," or "journey," or "vision"? Why not "inspiration," or "enlightenment," or "longing"? Surely these are as much a part of the life of faith as any grand quest for knowledge. But it has long been the tradition of this church to seek after knowledge. Oh, each and every one of us would have bitten the apple offered to us by the talking snake—or the mango! We love knowledge. We spend hours on the Internet looking for knowledge. We spend time with documentaries, public TV and radio, adult education! Knowledge is one of our favorite things, as it has been from our inception as a congregation. To know something is to carry the burden of your knowledge...whether that be a sadder-but-wiser outlook on life or tens of thousands of dollars of student debt. We love knowledge, but it is sometimes hard to embrace the sacrifice that knowledge demands.

Well, it's the first Sunday in Lent. Each year, we hear friends and relatives talking about the things they might be sacrificing for Lent. The big three tend to be caffeine, tobacco, and chocolate. Lent is a time when we meditate on the sacrifice that Christ makes of his own life, as he journeys toward the cross, trading his freedom for bondage, his good health for a time of suffering, his joy for pain, his life for death. Many will tell you that they know exactly why Jesus took upon himself the sacrifice of the cross, but in truth, I don't think any of us fully understands his reasoning. Why did he do it? Did he hope to gain something by it? Did Jesus believe that by giving his own life, he would inspire others? Did he do it to rid the world of sin? Did he do it as an example of what each of us must do eventually—if we are to live lives of meaning, which is to lay down our own desires and wishes, our self-interest, our well-being, and throw these things willingly into the life of the world, into causes bigger than ourselves, knowing that only by so doing can we ever hope to rise again to new life? Perhaps, in the end, he alone knew and knows what he was doing by embracing the cross. He knows...because after all has been said and done, we all know what sacrifice we are being called to make. We may want to un-know it. We may want to hide it beneath fig leaves. But the life of faith reveals to us the things that we must give, the things that we must endure, the things we must surrender. We know.

Church and faith can seem nice when they cost us little or nothing. But if we wish to journey deeper into our own spirits, into depths of joy and well-being, we will sooner or later come up against

the unwelcome knowledge that being faithful to the way of Christ will eventually lead us to a cross. It will. This knowledge is so hard that we often choose not to dwell on it, even here at church. But this is the season of Lent, and so let us linger a while in the awkward paradox. This we know to be true: We will only be whole and our true selves when we let go of the things that we wish to cling to. What sacrifice are you being called upon to make? What fig leaf must you allow to drop, like leaves from an autumn maple, what cross do you know very well you must finally embrace? “Yada, yada, yada.” You know. You know. You know. Amen.