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Lent 1A
Peace, Seattle
March 5, 2017
Gen 2:15-3:7, Matt 4:1-11

BEING HUMAN

The dinner table conversation at the Kindem home took a turn toward the macabre the other night, when Naomi shared her fascination with the carnivorous plants she's studying in science:
The pitcher plant, the sundew plant, and the dreaded Venus fly trap.

Her enthusiasm was catchy, and before long, we were clustered around my phone watching you-tube videos of flesh-eating plants luring prey and springing traps—each with its own unique method.[1]
We marveled anew at nature's ingenious answer to the question: *Where will my next meal come from?*

Reading Genesis after that evening gave me a new slant on the story of Eve, Adam, and the forbidden fruit.

Genesis takes us to the Garden of Eden this morning, where we find Eve in conversation with a creature which shares more than a few attributes with those carnivorous plants.

The wisdom of THE LINE God had drawn in the sand—humans on this side, God on this side—which our first parents had accepted up to this point—is challenged by the snake.
And as a result, tantalizing new possibilities lure our Eve and Adam in.

WHAT WOULD IT BE LIKE, they wonder, TO BE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE LINE?
What would it be like to play God?[2]

With that thought a shift takes place; God is no longer the giver of benevolent boundaries;
God is a barrier to be overcome.[3]

We all know how it ends: the fruit is taken; the fruit is eaten.
And its seeds take over their lives like some virulent invasive species.

In the end, trying to play God doesn't work; and it's Eve and Adam who end up being consumed.

I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD, YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GODS.

Any time we try to be something that we're not, something greater, something other than human, we violate that basic boundary; we cross the line. And it does not go well with us.

REMEMBER YOU ARE DUST AND TO DUST YOU SHALL RETURN.

That's what God told our first parents that day, and if you were here last Wednesday, it's those words you heard when the ashes were traced on your forehead.

Those words can sting, as the truth often does when we're found to be posers, but not necessarily so.

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[1] Here one of many examples: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-uhXH4dzMo
[2] The images "playing God" and "drawing a line," along with other elements of this sermon, have been inspired by and, in some cases, borrowed from Barbara Brown Taylor. *Living by the Word*, in *Christian Century*, February 7-14, 1996.
[3] Richard Eslinger. *New Proclamation A, 2007-2008*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) p. 143.

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There is no shame in being reminded who you are. There is no shame—or shouldn't be—in testing boundaries. It's when we start believing that something other than God can be trusted more than God that the problems begin.

In the long history of interpretation of the 3rd chapter of Genesis, Western Christianity, influenced greatly by St. Augustine's analysis, has focused more by far on the curse of Eve and Adam's violation than on the original blessing with which God infused the world.

For centuries theologians of the West cast Eve as the more culpable one—the scapegoat. Womankind (the so-called "weaker sex") bore a disproportionate weight of the guilt and shame, and this "original sin" became the most important feature of human existence; eclipsing the rest of creation's drama that had been unfolding for eons under God's loving, creative, generous hand.

Sometimes theological explanations can themselves become a trap, from which it may take centuries to extricate ourselves.

So let me say it again: There is no shame in being who we are created to be—which is human; creatures born of the humus, the soil, the *adamah*.

> **And the truth is, Adam and Eve are not our only ancestors.**[4] There is someone else who has claimed us as kin, and we hear that story today, too. Hear how the Spirit led him not into a garden but into a wilderness, where he too was tested.[5]
>
> This second story has a different ending than the first. Yes, it starts out scary enough—Jesus in a verbal battle with an adversary who quotes scripture with the best of them—but the outcome is different.

The devil goes for the jugular right off—with an assault on Jesus' identity:
"*IF YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD*…" **IF**.

But Jesus won't take the bait. You see, he heard the Voice from above at his baptism; heard it call him BELOVED, and he trusts that Voice. Trusts that it's true.

But Satan isn't done yet. He's as ingenious in setting his snares as the pitcher plant in luring its prey. ***"****Those colors, those scents look and smell just like what I was longing for!"*
But they are instead the very tantalizing features that spell my doom.

Three times the devil sets the trap. And three times Jesus shows him he knows who he is.

> There was a line drawn in this story as clearly as there was in the first one.[6] Jesus could play God or he could remain human. "He could go buzzing around the air turning the desert into a gourmet bakery or he could keep his feet on the ground and live with the ache in the pit of his stomach."
>
> Three times Jesus was tempted and three times he said no. He refused to cross over the line God had drawn. And for the time being, the devil was defeated.
>
> Both Adam and Jesus, Paul says, were tempted to play God. But whereas Adam stepped over the line and found humanity a curse, Jesus stayed behind the line and made humanity a blessing.

[4] Elements of the following paragraphs adapted from BBT, op. cit.
[5] Barbara Brown Taylor. *Living by the Word*, in *Christian Century*, February 7-14, 1996.
[6] Elements of the following paragraphs adapted from BBT, op. cit.

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One trespassed, one stayed put. One tried to be God, one was content to remain a human being. And the truth is, they're both alive in us, and we can feel them battling within us most days.

But if Adam and Eve's story is our story, then Jesus' story is ours too.
We are kin to both of them. We have both sets of genes in us.

And when the Adam or Eve in us is powerfully tempted to play God, the Jesus in us is more powerfully able to remain human, offering to keep us company on our own side of the line, and showing us that the way to discover our Godlikeness is not to curse our humanity but to bless it, by entering into it as fully as we dare.

Sisters and brothers, as we journey through Lent, we are called to live a "human-sized life this side of Eden." For it is on this soil, in this place that the Lord who formed us from the earth "offers to breathe life into us again and again." [7]

Let us pray.
Creator and Lord, you call us to live fully into our identity as your beloved daughters and sons. Make our trust in your saving grace stronger than any word, challenge, or snare that would seek to lure us away from you. Draw us to your Table now, like bees to honey. Sustain us with your lifegiving body and blood, that through you we may become a community that sustain others. In Jesus' name.

[7] Ibid.