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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
3/12/2017, The Second Sunday in Lent  
Genesis 12:1-4, John 3:1-17

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

For my preaching text, I commend to you dear people the last half of verse three in Genesis Chapter 12. It is a verse that speaks of a changing of the times and of the beginning of hope for humanity. The LORD makes a promise to Abraham of old. It goes this way:

...in you [Abraham] *all* the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Genesis 12:3, NRSV)

Prior to this verse, there is not a whole lot of joy on earth. I did a concordance study on the word “laughed,” and it turns out that you do not find the word until Genesis 17 — five chapters after this morning’s reading. That particular laugh is probably an improper one. When the LORD tells Abraham that he and his wife, Sarah, are going to have a son, Abraham laughs. And so we read this:

Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?  
(Genesis 17:7, KJV)

Well, Abraham probably should not have done that. It is not polite to laugh when your Maker makes a great promise to you. But the idea seemed so implausible to Abraham — that he and Sarah could have children in their old age — that he could hardly keep himself from laughing. Abraham, then, was probably wrong to laugh as he did, but at least he did laugh — he *could* laugh. And you do not hear much laughing in the first eleven chapters of Genesis.

As the Bible tells the story, the sin of our ancestors, Adam and Eve, sets off suffering. So, it always is. Sin is a setback for our human race. Sin, in some measure, always fabricates suffering on earth — suffering for someone, perhaps our neighbors, certainly ourselves, for sin diminishes us.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis illustrate that theme. Sin sets off a sequence of calamities. The story is pretty much downhill from the moment Adam and Eve eat of the forbidden fruit. Did Adam and Eve *know* that they were *sinning* in eating that fruit? Perhaps not. Probably not! They did not think they were sinning so much as they were using their God-given rationality. They were considering the argument of the serpent with their

good old human intelligence. They were evaluating the argument and taking their stand. It is just that in doing so, they were departing from the word of the LORD, and in the end, that cannot be good. The first eleven chapters of Genesis tell the tale. The first eleven chapters of Genesis speak of one disaster following another. It is relentless bad news.

So, a first calamity of eating the forbidden fruit is that the marriage of Adam and Eve becomes rocky. In the years, centuries, maybe even eons that came before, Adam had never done such a low thing to Eve. He had never tried to shift blame onto her. He had never thrown her under the bus. But see him now — now when he stands there with his apple core in his hand. He dares to mutter to the Lord about his Eve:

And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. (Genesis 3:12, KJV)

All these years later, husbands and wives are still tempted to do that: to break their unity. To make themselves strangers to one another. That's what this sermon is about: we do not need to do that. We ought not to do that. We ought not to be such a fragmented humanity.

So, a first calamity following sin is that the marriage of Adam and Eve becomes rocky.

Next, childbearing becomes painful. Even in our modern days, it is still painful. It is troubling, both for the mother and for the husband looking on

Next, the ground becomes contrary. Even with vast technology available to the farmer, still the farmer knows that the ground is contrary. It is no sure thing. Raising crops is vulnerable to drought, to hail, to flooding, to diseases of changing sorts. Before Adam and Eve sinned, I imagine that Adam could plop a seed into the ground and up would spring a beautiful watermelon. Now, things are iffy for the farmer.

And then there is murder. I mean, Cain murders his brother Abel. Do you see what I mean: Genesis gives this grim picture of the consequences of sin: betrayal, pain, sweat and labor, even murder.

And the story goes on with bad news. In Genesis 6 we read about the strange marriage of the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men”:

the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were fair;  
and they took to wife such of them as they chose. (Genesis 6:2, RSV)

Something has gone wrong here. It seems to be a mixing of species.

Shortly afterwards, we read of a devastating divine evaluation of humanity:

And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. (Genesis 6:5, KJV)

And so the heart of God is grieved. He looked at us and was deeply disappointed:

And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. (Genesis 6:6, KJV)

This divine disappointment is soon followed by the story of Noah and the Lord's resolve to destroy his human creation. Except that it appears that the Lord cannot bring himself to utterly do it. He sends the great flood on earth, yes, yet he spares Noah and his family. Some descendents of Adam and Eve remain: Noah and his family.

But soon the human story plunges back into chaos. The calamities following Adam and Eve's sin continue until they culminate in *our* situation: the "Babel syndrome," as it has been called.<sup>1</sup> You remember, I bet, the story of Babel. The people of that town imagine that they can build a tower that reaches up to heaven, as if they could storm that good place (Genesis 11:4). But the Lord says No to this ambition. The text goes this way:

[The LORD said] let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. (Genesis 11:7-8, KJV)

And so it is that we are left with this question: Is this all there is to life? Is it the destiny of humanity to be forever scattered, continually fragmenting, and barely able to talk with one another?

It doesn't feel right, does it? The Babel syndrome is not our natural home. We are made for unity and fellowship, and the scattering of humanity just does not feel right to us.

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Anthony Spina in Genesis 12:1-4, in *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The First Readings: The Old Testament and Acts*: 001 (Kindle Locations 468-473). Kindle Edition.) I am indebted to Spina for his theme about Genesis 12 providing a beginning answer to the heartaches of Genesis 1-11.

I've probably told you this story before, but I mean to tell it again now, because it seems so relevant to the circumstances of Babel. It is a story from my Pastor's booth. I was tempted to not set up that booth on election day, because we have a polling place nearby, and I did not want my Pastor's booth to get in the way. By one of our members urged me to continue with my Tuesday morning pattern — and perhaps on Election Tuesday more than any other day. I am glad I did. So let me lift up one of the prayer requests I received that day at my pastor's booth: an earnest lady came to my booth and requested prayer "that I not hate the people who vote on the other side." I was glad to pray such a prayer.

Serious matters were at issue, and profound disagreement was stalking the land. Yet the prayer of this good woman was a prayer for unity — unity not just with the people who voted the same as she did, but also unity with those who voted against her.

What she wanted is that the Babel separation of people should not continue. As far as lay possible with her, she wanted to stay together with people even on the other side.

She was fighting the temptation to shut down and shut people out. "I am getting older," we think to ourselves. "I am taking no prisoners. I will no longer suffer fools. Let them go away. Life is too short for this nonsense. I am not going to waste my time with idiots."

We can say such things about national politics. Alas, we can even say such things about our friends, even about our spouse. We can simply stop talking — at least stop talking in any meaningful way.

And, in our generation, even when our spirits are good and our natures sweet, we are still tempted toward the Babel syndrome because of our technology. We submit to the voluntary epilepsy of continually checking our smart phone. We sit on the subway listening to our music, watching our downloads, oblivious to our neighbors. And so it is that to this very day, humanity is scattered and liable to fly apart.

But with this morning's First Lesson, we reach a turning point in the story. Genesis Chapter 12 is the beginning answer to the heartaches of Genesis Chapters 1-11. With the call of Abraham, the LORD commences his rescue of a scattered humanity. Notice the word "bless" in the LORD's promise to Abraham. After all the misery of the first eleven chapters, the LORD now speaks of blessing humanity. And not just a handful of humanity, but *all* of them:

...in you [Abraham] *all* the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Genesis 12:3, NRSV)

Thus begins the story of humanity's comeback. Adam and Eve disobeyed the word of the LORD, with disasters piling up ever afterwards. But the LORD

asked Abraham to leave everything behind — his land, his farm, his animals, his kindred. The LORD asked Abraham to do this thing, and Abraham up and did it. Abraham matched the disobedience of Adam and Eve with his own human obedience.

And one day, his greater descendent, Jesus of Nazareth, matched the disobedience of Adam and Eve with his even greater obedience. He was obedient to the will of the Father all the way to the Cross for the salvation of the world.

This is why we cherish this morning's Gospel Lesson. This is why we instinctively say Amen to these great verses John 3:16-17:

<sup>16</sup>For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16-17, RSV)

What we learn in these golden verses is that love has been at play throughout our human story. It was because "God so loved the world" that Adam and Eve did not fall down dead as doornails, the ground did not become impossible to farm, the flood did not utterly destroy humanity, the Babylonian captivity did not end Israel, and your sin and my sin do not ruin us, wrecking our hopes for eternity. "God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world *might be saved* through him."

It is the will of our God that we should fight separation, isolation, silence, and the writing off of others. It is the will of our Maker that we draw closer to one another and draw closer to the One who draws close to us in his holy life, death, and resurrection, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.