

# Where Are You?

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent

Based on Genesis 3:1-8 and Psalm 32:1-5

February 10, 2008

## Introduction

*According to the way the church has counted time, we are entering into a new season – the season of Lent. Lent is a 40-day season that started this past Wednesday on what is called Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday is a time to humble ourselves before God in order to remember the brevity of life and sinfulness of our condition. Sometimes you’ll hear me say that the Good News of Jesus Christ means two things: first, we are worse off than we would ever dare to admit; and, secondly, we are more loved than we would ever dare to imagine. Well, during Lent we spend some time focusing on the first half of that statement – we are worse off than we would ever dare to admit. Why? Because it’s honest; because it makes us humble and real; because as I focus on what needs to change in my life, it makes me more loving and less judgmental towards the things that you need to change in your life.*

*Lent is a time for self-examination, a time to ask questions about our lives. Now this doesn’t have to be a scary time of beating ourselves up; no, for a follower of Christ we always ask these questions under the accepting gaze of a Savior who loves us. Now for this Sunday morning many churches around the world will focus on two Scripture passages – Genesis 3 and Psalm 32. What do they have to say about our lives?*

## Read Genesis 3:1-8

Did you ever notice that some of the best “answers” to life’s problems are actually questions? That’s why Jesus loved asking questions. Jesus often taught by asking really good but short questions. The ancient story you just heard from the Book of Genesis also has one of the great questions of life. *Where are you?* In Hebrew, the original language that the Bible was written in, this question is only one word – *ayeka*. *Where are you?* It’s the shortest and most devastating and most hopeful question anyone will ever ask you. *Where are you?* .

What does it mean and why did God have to ask it? Doesn’t God know everything? If so, why did he have to hunt for Adam by asking, “Where are you?” The ancient Jewish Rabbis taught that God didn’t need to ask the question; it was Adam who needed to hear the question. The question gave Adam an opportunity to come clean and confess his sin and his true state before God. It’s like the way my mother used my middle name when I was in big trouble. Whenever my mother yelled “Mathew Glen Woodley you come here right now” I knew that my life was over because of something I broke or someone I hit. It was time to stop running and confess everything.

There's an ancient Jewish story about a rabbi from Russia who was imprisoned by the Tsarist police forces. The rabbi was interrogated by a jailer who wanted to ridicule his faith so he asked, "How are we to understand that God, the All-knowing, said to Adam, 'Where are you?'" The rabbi answered the jailer, "You don't understand: this question wasn't just for Adam; it is for everyone man or woman on the face of the earth. For in every era God asks, 'Where are you in your world? So many of the days and years that God gave you have already passed, and where are you? You have lived forty-six years. How far along are you?'" Now when the jailer heard his exact age – 46 years – he stood up shaken. He placed his hand on the rabbi's shoulder and wept.<sup>1</sup>

Lent is the time of year when we ask – with pure and unflinching honesty – where am I? Or, more accurately, we allow God's voice to penetrate to the core of our being: Where are you? What have you done with your life? As someone has said, it's a time to "render a spiritual accounting not of our careers but our compassion, not of our wealth but our wisdom, not of our gains but our gifts, not of our physical fitness but of the fitness of our souls,"<sup>2</sup> not of how others have harmed us but how we have harmed them.

Where are you? It is a difficult question and most of us don't want to face the question or God the Questioner. Like Adam, we'd rather hide, evade and run away from the Questioner. In verse 7 we see that happens to people who live as fugitives from God. They feel exposed and shameful. In circles of therapy and recovery the word shame refers to something that cripples the human spirit. That kind of shame implies the deep feeling that I am rotten at the core, that I cannot change and that I am not worthy of redemption. It leads to what St. Paul called the "law of sin and death." We could label that "bad shame."

But that is not the way shame is used in Genesis. In the Bible there's also a "good shame." Good shame is the basic moral feeling that we have done something wrong and we ought to do something else to make it right. Someone has said that this good shame "shame is the engine of the moral life because it leads us to reconstruct our moral life after we have torn it down."

Like parents using middle names, good shame isn't a popular idea anymore. My fellow Minnesotan Garrison Keillor wrote a hilarious essay called "The current Crisis in Remorse." It's written by a fictitious social worker who was once employed as a "professional remorse officer" in the Department of Human Services. The poor guy didn't even get an office—just a desk across from the elevator and a phone that he had to share with the director of the Nephew Program in Family Counseling. "Morale in remorse has never been lower," he complains. "We in remorse are a radical minority within the social-work community. We believe that not every wrong in our society is the result of complex factors such as poor early-learning environment and resultative dissocialized communication. Some wrong is the result of badness. We believe that some

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<sup>1</sup> This quote and the main point in this sermon are taken from a wonderful article by Rabbi Marc Gellman called "Where Are You, Adam?" found in First Things, May 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Marc Gellman's words.

people act like jerks ... They do bad things. They should feel sorry for what they did and stop it.”<sup>3</sup> That’s a call for good shame – from a comedian no less.

Notice the attempt by Adam and Eve in verse 7 – “they realized they were naked, so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.” Fig leaves represent anything we do or achieve or have so we can cover our nakedness and shame. Psychologists have a fancy term for fig leaves – they call them defense mechanisms. Defense mechanisms are the techniques (which we’re usually not consciously aware of) that we use to shield ourselves from the truth about our condition.

We all have them – and they are notoriously wicked and tricky. Listen to the way the Bible describes our ability to hide and create fig leaves for ourselves:

- “the heart is deceitful above all else” (Jeremiah 17:9)
- “men loved darkness instead of light” (John 3:19)
- “men who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Romans 1:18)

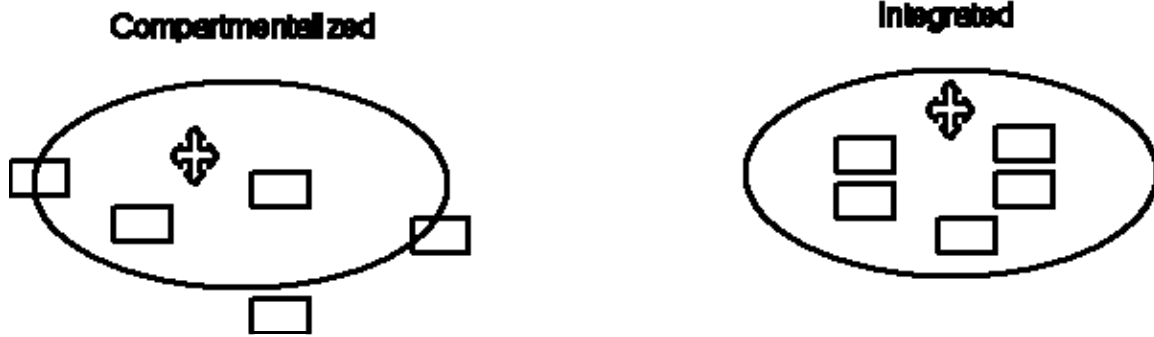
Sin is intrinsically deceptive; there is an urge to cover up.

Here are some of the most common fig leaf/ defense mechanism that we use:

1. **Denial** is perhaps the mother of all fig leaves. We just block it out.
2. **Rationalization** is another one that says, “I know that that’s wrong but it’s okay for me because \_\_\_\_\_.”
3. **Blaming** others is a huge fig leaf. If I keep blaming you for my problems, then I don’t have to face my own nakedness. That’s exactly what Adam and Eve did in this passage: they passed the buck. “It’s that woman you gave me.” Or “it’s that man you gave me, God. He or she is defective. If I could just get rid of him or her or them, I wouldn’t feel naked and ashamed.” Adam seems incapable of accepting responsibility for his actions. Adam “insists on portraying himself as a victim of choices made by others rather than as a guilty party who has made bad choices (by) himself ... The question to Adam was, ‘Where are you?’ All he could offer as his insipid answer was, ‘Where was everybody else?’”
4. Soren Kierkegaard believed that one of the most potent defense mechanisms consists of **intellectualization**. In other words, I protect myself from the anxiety of my shame by developing a highly intellectual approach to life. I intellectualize reality and hold it at bay. So rather than experience the love of God, I merely give lectures about the love of God. As a substitute for sexual purity, I think about the rightness of sexual purity. I think about God; therefore I am right with God. We would call it the paralysis of analysis.
5. **Compartmentalization** literally means “to put or separate into detached compartments, divisions, or categories.” In other words, I try to maintain separate compartments to my life – so here’s my Christian life over here and here’s my sex life over here and here’s my money and over here’s the way I treat people I don’t like. (See the diagram below).

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<sup>3</sup> Garrison Keillor, *We Are Still Married* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 22.



6. **Entitlement** is a subset of rationalization in which I say, “I know this may be wrong, but I deserve it. Other people may not deserve it, but I do. People don’t reach out to me so I’m entitled to cut them off. My spouse or my friends don’t meet my needs so I can look at elsewhere to get my needs met. Entitlement is a deep-seated belief that I am above the rules. It shows up in little ways ... but it can move on to major things in which I say, “I deserve this because \_\_\_\_\_.”

We have to come clean; we have to stand before God in silence and nakedness and answer the question *Where are you?* But that raises a troubling question: How do I come clean? If we all have fig leaves, if we’re riddled with defenses, if we all keep running away from God, why would we ever want to stand still and come clean? Why not just keep running away? How could we ever answer the question of where are you?

**First, we begin by accepting Jesus for us.** Notice verse 8 – “Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the Garden in the cool of the day...” So here’s the amazing twist to this story: God pursues us. *Where are you?* On the one hand, the fact that God calls out to these lost fugitives is like a summons. After all, God is the Judge of the whole earth. God will call all of us to account for our lives. But this question also comes from the heart of someone who loves us. Think of it along these lines: a 17 year old girl finally comes home at 3:00 in the morning, reeking with alcohol and cigarettes, and her broken-hearted bleary-eyed father meets her at the door. The next day he sits by her bed and as she sleeps off her hangover he asks, “Where are you? Where did you go? Where is that little girl that was so full of life and joy and love?” And he’s saying, “I miss you.” Did you ever think that God misses you? Did you ever think that you’re not just in trouble with God, but that the God of the universe notices your absence and He wants you back?

That’s exactly what the Bible teaches. The Bible is a story of lost and found – God is the Seeker and we are the lost fugitives. Throughout the Older Testament God keeps saying to His people, “Return to me. Come back to me. What happened to the intimacy we once had? You moved away.” And all throughout the Older Testament God was providing a way for us to come back, to cover our nakedness and shame, to lure us out of hiding. God keeps saying, “A new day is coming. There is a new way for you to come to me, a new way to heal your brokenness, a new way to cover your shame, a new way to

live, a new way to love others, a new way for the entire earth. And then Jesus comes and he says, “That new day has come. I am the new way that was promised.”

When Jesus died on the cross he paid the debt for our waywardness and built a bridge to people who were lost. The cross is God’s redemptive intervention for facing the truth about our lives. First, it exposes our sin for what it is: an ugly, horrendous violation of God’s law. Not only is it ugly, but it’s also costly. Think of the following scenario: you come home from vacation and you discover that someone has driven a pick-up truck all over your yard. The grass has been torn up and your landscaping destroyed. Then you notice that it’s even worse: someone has egged your windows and spray-painted obscenities on your new siding. You are outraged. This is an ugly violation of decency and goodness. Once you get over the shock and outrage you will probably say something like this: “Someone has to pay for this. Someone should be held accountable. There is a debt here. This is ugly and costly.” At the cross our sin was nailed to the perfect and holy Son of God, Jesus Christ. It was ugly and it was costly and someone had to pay for it. We can’t deny it or blame someone else for it. No, I am responsible for it. According to the old spiritual, “It’s not my brother or my sister but it’s me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.”

But the Bible also makes it clear that we can’t pay for it by ourselves. We don’t have the resources. That leads us to the second thing about the cross: it shows us how deeply we are loved. Because at the cross, Jesus, the perfect and one-and-only Son of God and God-in-the-flesh stepped into our place and said, “I will pay the debt for you. I will bear it. I will carry it.”

So now everything you’ve ever done was exposed there on the cross – every thought, every deed, every white lie, every example of compartmentalization and entitlement, every act of cowardice and betrayal, every instance of bitterness or greed or rage, every time you looked lustfully at another human being and wanted what they could give you rather than what you could give them – all of it was exposed on the cross. God knows it all. God saw it all before you even did it. God had a record of it but he nailed it to the cross of Jesus Christ.

Rabbi Gellman ends his very fine sermon on this passage with the following quote: “My advice is (that we may) ... view all our deeds up to this moment as balanced between good and evil, and hope our answer to *ayeka* will tip the balance in our favor among the accountants in charge of the book life.” With all due respect to Rabbi Gellman, I find this unsatisfactory. Under the New Covenant established by Messiah-Jesus, we get something better than a wish and pray that that the balance will tip in our favor. It is called the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

**Second, we pray for guidance.** Find a place quiet, a silent place for prayer. For some of you, this will be uncomfortable, perhaps excruciatingly painful. You may want to run away, but don’t. Those feelings of strangeness are normal. Stay with it. Be silent and then pray, “Search me, o God, and know my heart; see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” Or you can pray the ancient prayer of a man named

Augustine who said, “God, always the same, let me know myself, let me know you.” Or, again, he prayed, “Let me know you, my knower; let me know you as I am known.”

**Third, stay with the questions of life.** Ask yourself tough, honest questions:

- Am I living the way I want others to live?
- Are my behaviors and attitudes consistent with Jesus?
- If Jesus was standing in this compartment of my life would I be happy to have him around me?
- Is what I’m doing consistent with what I tell others to do?
- If people followed me around all day would they be more joyful in Christ?
- Am I becoming freer in Christ or more in bondage to sin?
- Do I ever subtly think, “This is wrong but I deserve it?”
- Are there compartments to my life?

Stay with the questions. Allow God to search your heart. Perhaps you should ask someone else as well. “Confess your sins to one another...”

**Fourth, ask for self-correction.** Sometimes we will hear God whisper minor corrections to the course of our lives: “You’re too stubborn; you’re too harsh; you haven’t forgiven x; you aren’t very generous with your money ...” But at times when God asks, “Where are you?” the question and the answer may be utterly devastating. We may wake up and say, “My God, I am so far from you. My heart is so dead. My mind is so saturated with the world and with petty concerns. Somehow, somewhere on my life’s journey I got so horribly off-track. Now I’m so far from you, God. I’ve been so busy building a career, busy making a living or raising a family or ... but I don’t know where I am anymore.”

This is painful. But let me urge you to stay with the questions – even when they are painful – because it’s more painful to not face the truth, to shut our ears to God’s voice. Listen to how the psalmist put it, “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through all my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.” Now I ask you: Is that the way you want to live your life? Here’s the alternative as the psalmist prayed, “Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my transgression. I said, ‘I will confess my sin to the Lord’ – and you forgave the guilt of my sin” (Psalm 32:3-5).

As we close the service this morning, I want to give you time with God – to listen to His voice and not just mine. God asked the question so long ago *Where are you?* God is still asking that question this morning because he loves you. *Where are you?*