

*From the Desk of the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey A. Schooley*  
*A Sermon for Sunday, February 26, 2023 - Lent 1*

If you attended our Ash Wednesday service, you've already heard my love sonnet to etymology – that is, the study of word origins. If you weren't at Ash Wednesday, say a little prayer for those who were and who began their Lenten penance by indulging my nerd-poetics to words. Today, we shift from etymology to etiology – that is, the study of the cause or causes of a thing. Etiology more commonly appears in the medical field where, as a random example with no recent precedence demonstrates, scientists try to discover the origin or cause of a particular respiratory infection; a patient-zero, if you will.

But etiology can also describe the attempt to unearth the cause of other, non-viral phenomenon. A recent example of high-quality etiological research is Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, which was published over 13 years ago, but found new relevance and significance in the wake of George Floyd's murder nearly three years ago. Essentially, Alexander notices that a disproportionate number of prisoners in America are black and brown men, and then asks the question "Why?"

"Why?" It's a powerful question that demands causal explanation. "Mere chance" or "coincidence" does not satisfy the etiological inquiry of "Why?" Don't get me wrong, if you are getting metaphorically waterboarded by a curious six-year-old child or grandchild, you may very well find yourself not giving two hoots about etiology as you exasperatedly say, "That's just the way it is!" But the exasperation, I contend, comes less from the barrage of questions than it does the helplessness that comes from realizing that we *don't know* why certain things are the way they are. Let's take an example close to the church's heart.

Why does poverty exist? Why do some people have more and some people have less – and not just comparatively less, but the sort of "less" that is really just a code word for "not enough to sufficiently survive"? So, why do some people have more than enough to survive and thrive and others do not? We are, after all, a Matthew 25 congregation, which means we've made pledges to seek the eradication of systemic poverty in our community. We support Brown Bag, The Cocoon, and Crim Elementary School to this end. We have our own Deacons Shop and, as you heard me remind you during announcements this morning, we collect supplies for First Christian Church's Helping Hands initiative. We care about poverty and justice and securing – at the very least – "enough" for all people. But why do these needs exist in the first place? That's an etiological question and etiological questions about problems are helpful because we believe that if we understand a thing's origin, then we can better respond to that thing.

Well, I can't answer that poverty question – or, rather, not completely and not in the time allotted to a sermon. What I can say is that even liberals and conservatives agree that there is one root cause to poverty – Sin. Conservatives believe it

is the sin of sloth, or laziness, that leads some to not have enough. Liberals believe it is the sin of greed that leads some to possess too much at the expense of those who possess too little. But, again, they both believe that sin is the cause. Further, since poverty routinely leads to death – another fact with bipartisan agreement – a topic like poverty very quickly moves us into theological territory as we seek to understand the origins of sin and death.

Welcome, then, to Genesis, chapters 1-3. These mythic poetics seek to explain the existence of sin and death in our world. The phenomena of sin and death are indisputable, but until our Jewish forebears gifted us these etiological stories, it was just about anyone's guess why these terrible things kept happening. Or, more theologically, why God let these things happen and what God is doing about it.

We pick up our inquiry after the two creation stories. Oh, just so we're on the same page, there are *two* creation stories in scripture. In the first, God speaks everything into existence in a deeply systematic and symbolic way full of hierarchies of power wherein that which is created on Day One corresponds to Day Four, Day Two to Day Five, and Day Three to Day Six. Re-read chapter 1 of Genesis to see what I mean by that. In the second, there is already all non-human creation (no mention of where that came from because the second creation story is only trying to explain why we exist) and so the second creation story is about the creation of Adam, his loneliness, and the subsequent creation of Eve.

Again, we pick things up, though, after all has been created. In this story we find Eve interacting with part of God's creation, the Serpent. Scripture will come to lead us to see the Serpent as none other than Satan or the Devil himself. I can't dispute where the tradition takes us, but if you look at the text itself for this morning, you'll see that this is – at best – merely implied. The text itself simply describes the serpent as "more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made"; it doesn't name him as the Devil here and now. Through dialogue and some slight exaggerations of what God had actually told Adam and Eve, the serpent (for reasons that go unexplained) convinces the proto-humans to dine on food forbidden by God to them. This is sin. Disobedience is the bedrock of sin. The consequences for this transgression, which come later in chapter three, is the creation of death, pain, and toil – all phenomena that didn't exist in God's good creation prior to the disobedience of Adam and Eve, but also phenomena that plagued the lives of the original authors of this story, as well as plaguing our lives today. Just read the prayer requests in your bulletin and you'll see that we pretty much only pray for the eradication of various manifestations of death, pain, and toil.

I'm going to guess, though, that this etiological story does not do enough work for you. I don't think it does for me. I'm a pastor because I believe that Jesus' Church – as the very Body of

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Christ – has a role to play in something like the eradication of poverty. In fact, I’m a pastor and not a politician or lawyer or economist because I believe we have a *greater* and *more important* role to play in this work. But in this instance, pushing the “Why?” question to its very origins would not seem to do enough to help us figure out how to eradicate these consequences of sin.

Paul felt the same way when he wrote to the church in Rome. In the selection I read a moment ago, Paul makes clear reference to the Creation and Fall stories. But rather than recommending something like, “We just need to be 100-percent obedient to the Law and everything will be alright,” he instead writes that we need a full restart – a pressing of the Reset button on your NES when King Koopa once again got the best of you in level 8-4. In Paul’s hands, the goal is less to get ourselves back to the Garden and more to find our re-creation in Jesus Christ, whom Paul defines as a sort of Second Adam.

Etiological stories do not only exist to answer “Why?” questions simply for the sake of having the knowledge of that answer. Knowledge without purpose is actually the root of the problem when Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Knowledge without direction or purpose is also sin. Instead, this etiological story exists to help us see and understand what God is doing to correct the personal and social ills of sin and death. And the answer, of course, is Jesus Christ.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, a journey that will take us all the way to the Cross and then the empty tomb of Jesus the Christ. I’m going to give you the most well-known spoiler ever right now: Jesus corrects our problems of sin and death in His death and resurrection. That’s where this journey is taking us. We already know the destination, but it is appropriate that the lectionary encourages us to understand the origin – that is, to understand where we’re coming from that we might better embrace and appreciate where our God is leading us to.

And, significantly, just as we begin Lent in one garden – the Garden of Eden – you will discover that we’ll end Lent on Easter Sunday in another garden, in the garden where Jesus’ empty tomb stands. The Good News of the Gospel couldn’t be clearer in its symbolism; both creation and God’s re-creation in Jesus take place in gardens. The disobedience that plagued us in the beginning has now been conquered in the obedience of the Messiah, an obedience we vicariously share in to the degree that we are found in Christ.

Even still, Genesis does tell us a story of a most confounding start. Why does God make the serpent more crafty than all the other animals? Why does the serpent seem to thrive on inspiring disobedience? Even if we follow the tradition and see none other than Satan in the serpent, why did God let Satan rebel and foment such future disobedience? In a creation that God declares “very

good” (literally, in the original Hebrew, the emphatic “good good” creation), why are there already agents or elements of bad, of evil? The story won’t and can’t answer these probing “Why?” questions. Instead, it exists to reassure us that even in our rebellion, in our disobedience, God is still in control.

As any 10-year-old who has ever giggled at the nudity in these stories can tell you, no sooner has God leveled the consequences for Adam and Eve’s disobedience than God begins to exert compassionate care over them. They had stitched together a few leaves – hardly sufficient covering for the pain, toil, and death that now await them – but before God banishes them from idyllic Eden, God makes for them garments of skin. God kills part of the creation to make sure humanity is sufficiently cared for.

Now, I hope that this part of the story leaves you dissatisfied. I hope that you yearn for a world where your needs can be met *without* anyone or anything else having to die. Because if so, then Easter is going to be a great delight for you, for the Easter story is one in which the continued death and sacrifice of other parts of God’s creation for the good of humanity is ended because God becomes Himself the sacrifice sufficient to secure our needs. Genesis 3, with humanity now outside the Garden, but at least sufficiently clothed, is *not* an “all’s well that ends well” story. All is not well, but all still remains under God’s control, God’s providence. And God will bring us to an “ends well” place. Until then, though, we entrust ourselves to the re-creation offered us through the Second Adam and we recommit to living lives of self-sacrificing obedience as our witness to this Good News. And whatever “Why?” questions might rightly remain, we reframe them as a “Who?” question. Who will bring us through this time of sin and death into a place of joy and life? Who will solve the problems that even, per Paul, our perfect obedience to the Law cannot solve? Who will speak a good Word over our lives that silences the serpent? Jesus Christ, who we’ll meet again in a different garden six weeks from now, that’s who.

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