

Title: Falling Away, Falling Toward  
Date: 2/26/2023 (Lent 1, Year A)  
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church  
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)  
Readings: [Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7](#); [Romans 5:12-19](#); [Matthew 4:1-11](#); [Psalm 32](#)  
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/4HPrEjyW6Ps?t=1374>

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*<sup>1</sup>

If that prayer sounds familiar, that's because I prayed it at the beginning of this service. It is the Collect of the Day for today, and if praying the Daily Office is part of your spiritual practice, you have the option to pray it as part of Morning or Evening Prayer every day for the rest of this week.

Even if that's not your practice, I invite you to pick a time each day to pray this prayer. Even though a collect is about collecting all of our prayers and lifting them up to God, it can also provide a focus our prayers.

Let these words wash over you again and again. Maybe take away a particular word or phrase or image with you each time. However you engage with it, a prayer like this can help prepare our hearts and put us in the proper state of mind as we enter the season of Lent.

Praying it over and over may also help us wrestle with the scriptures assigned for today. Though they are relatively short, they are hard, they are heavy, and it's hard to read them without being weighed down by the history of how they've been understood...and used.

In my version of the Bible, the Harper Collins Study Bible, this passage from Genesis is given the title, "The First Sin and its punishment."<sup>2</sup> The word sin doesn't appear in this passage at all,<sup>3</sup> but many people associate the term "original sin" with Adam and Eve and something called "The Fall."

Old Testament Scholar Dr. Wil Gafney writes, "It is important to note that there is no mention of sin, or grace or innocence, or of loss in this context."<sup>4</sup>

She goes on to point out that not much was said about Adam & Eve at all when the Hebrew and Greek versions of the Hebrew Bible was being edited; and 2) compared to the Exodus narrative, this account isn't mentioned much in the Hebrew Bible. It didn't have the same kind of importance, or baggage, that it does now.

This story has been used as the reason that men should rule over women. See what happens when a man listens to a woman? You can't put them in charge. You can't let them make the decisions. They can't preach. They shouldn't be priests.

I just want to point out that Adam was right there and could have chimed in at any time, but he stayed silent. This doesn't make a strong case for him to be a model of wisdom and authority, either.

This story also reinforces the misguided and dangerous notion that women tempt men to sin; women cause men to sin. When God asked Adam if he's eaten from the tree God told him not to eat from, Adam immediately points the finger at Eve. "She gave me the fruit from the tree, and I ate" (Gen 3:12). It's her fault. She came on to me. Look at what she's wearing. She shouldn't have rejected me.

This story has been used to justify the belief that humans after Adam are born in a state of sin. In modern language, this is like saying that we were created with some kind of factory defect. Did God make a mistake? Why did God tell Adam not to eat from just that one tree? Did God set them up for failure?

Old Testament Scholar John J. Collins says of this story, "What we have here is an etiology- a story that is told to explain the cause of something."<sup>5</sup> This story in Genesis was created to explain the way things were. This wasn't meant to be history or science as we understand it. This story was an attempt to understand why we humans suffer and why we die. It shared similar characteristics with the creation myths of other ancient near eastern cultures of that time.

The book of Genesis was probably compiled between the tenth and sixth centuries BCE (before the common era).<sup>6</sup> But Adam and Eve don't really come up again until first century CE. After all those thousands of years, New Testament and rabbinic authors and early Christian theologians suddenly start weighing in on what happened under the tree of the knowledge of good or evil.

Thousands of years after the book of Genesis was written and compiled, it was used again to explain the cause of something. I don't know why it came up for the rabbis, but the early followers of Christ were using it to understand why God would send the Son of God into this world.

This time, the Son of God was also the Son of Man. Looking at today's passage from Paul's letter to the Romans, we can see how Paul used the first human to explain what Jesus did for us.

"Sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all who have sinned" (Rom 5:12).

Through Adam, death exercised dominion over us. After Adam, the certainty of death, the threat of death, dangles over our heads.

What about Jesus? Through Jesus, an abundance of grace and the gift of right relationship with God will exercise dominion in our lives (Rom 5:17). Jesus has enacted the ultimate reversal; he transformed the certainty of death into the promise of everlasting life. This is not a gift we had to earn. This is not a gift we could **ever** earn. It is a free gift, and it is ours.

God also gave us the gift of free will. What are we freed from? And what are we freed for?

We can choose to fall toward God, or we can choose to fall away from God. It is important to remember that this is not a once and done kind of deal. This is a choice we can make over and over; this is a choice we can get better at making, with God's help, because Jesus.

As I thought about how to talk about freedom and choice, I really struggled. If there is one right choice, is there really a choice? Do we really have free will? Yet the way life works is that different choices lead to different outcomes. Does breaking the laws of God make us **more** free? There are consequences when we choose to commit murder or adultery or don't observe the Sabbath. If we end up in a physical prison, or cause hurt to our loved ones, or damage our relationship with God, the *next* set of choices we can choose from suddenly becomes a lot more limited.

Does obeying the laws of God make us **less** free? We are freed from judgment and fear. We are freed from feeling we are unworthy, that we need to keep proving ourselves to God. Instead, we are free to receive what God has so freely offered us, an abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness.

In the season of Lent, we are invited to examine our lives and contemplate the kinds of reversal we need to enact. How will you fall toward God? How will you free yourselves to receive the gifts of God?

Will you loosen the bonds of pride... or the bonds of humility? Will you accept more responsibility for the way things are or stop taking the blame for everyone and everything? Will you loosen the bonds of self-sufficiency and let someone help you, or will you loosen the bonds of codependency and find your way into a more healthy relationship with yourself? Will you push yourself harder... or show yourself the grace you so freely offer other people?

The choice **you** are called to make may give death dominion over **me**. The answer that brings **me** into right relationship with God and my neighbors may cause **you** to fall farther away from them. Every temptation, every weakness, is a chance for us to make a course correction or to affirm that we are going in the right direction.

It's hard to live with that kind of intention and awareness all the time. In Lent, we pick one area, one temptation, one weakness. Temptation doesn't usually come in the form of a serpent, nor weakness in the form of a forbidden fruit. It usually comes in a more subtle form; it comes in disguise.

In the words of the Book of Common Prayer, I invite you, therefore, in the name of the Church, to the observance of a holy Lent, by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting, and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy Word (BCP 265).

As we pray and practice, as we practice and pray, may we remember that by God's gracious gift we are given everlasting life, and through Jesus Christ, death no longer has dominion over us.

And that is good news indeed.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://lectionarypage.net/YearA\\_RCL/Lent/ALent1\\_RCL.html](http://lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Lent/ALent1_RCL.html)

<sup>2</sup> The Harper Collins Study Bible Including Apocryphal Deuterocanonical Books with Concordance (NRSV), Old Testament p 9

<sup>3</sup> It first appears in Gen 4:7

<sup>4</sup> Gafney, Wil. Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne p 27

<sup>5</sup> Collins, John J. Introduction to the Hebrew Bible, p 128

<sup>6</sup> The Harper Collins Study Bible Including Apocryphal Deuterocanonical Books with Concordance (NRSV), Old Testament p 3