

STOP THE CAR!

The Rev. J. Donald Waring
Grace Church in New York
The First Sunday in Lent
March 5, 2017

Therefore, just as the one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so the one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. (Romans 5:18)

Two weeks ago I was visiting with my mother and two brothers. As always when we get together, we told stories of years gone by. An incident that none of us can forget involved some friends of my older brother when they were all in high school. One year as summer drew to a close, a large gathering of students was enjoying a party. Among the crowd were five popular athletes. These five were always a bit on the wild side, and even before they arrived at the party, they were well on the way to being drunk. In short order this group decided that more fun could be had elsewhere, so they climbed back into their VW Rabbit and peeled off into the night.

After a few terrifying minutes of screeching tires, near misses, and run red lights, one of the five inside the car decided that he'd had enough. He demanded to be let out and he walked home. The other four sped off at a high rate speed, and some way down the road smashed into a tree at 70 mph. The driver and two others were killed instantly, the fourth in the back seat died two days later. The wreck was so bad that police on the scene could not identify the victims. Tracing the license plate, they learned the identity of the driver and went to his home first, where they broke the devastating news to his parents. From there they dispatched more officers to the party, where the remaining students named all five who had driven off in the car. The grim task of notifying the other victims' families could now begin.

At one home an officer rang the bell and a man answered the door, presumably the father of one of the teenagers who had been killed. The officer told him they believed his son had been involved in an automobile accident. "That can't be," said the man. "My son is upstairs in his bed." Indeed he was. This was the house of the one who had quit the ride and walked home. The decision to stop the car and get out had saved his life.

In today's reading from the Epistle to the Romans (5:12-19), Paul the Apostle writes as if all of humanity is along for a deadly ride with a reckless driver behind the wheel. We are along for the ride with Adam, and it is a matter of life and death that we stop the car and get out. The reading is dense, and takes some getting through, so you will have to bear with me as we try to unwind it. We might begin by looking at it through the filter of today's reading from Genesis (2:15-17, 3:1-7). In the Hebrew language of the Old Testament, the name Adam is as much a generic term for all humankind as it is a proper name for one particular individual. Thus, when the writers of Genesis set out to tell the story of our beginnings, they chose the name Adam to imply that here is the universal history of all humans, not just the story of one human. So in Biblical usage, Adam is the representative human as well as, if not more so than, the first human. When we hear Paul today in Romans explain that we are all implicated in Adam's sin, people often object. Why should one man's transgression at the beginning of time tarnish me? The objection is understandable, but also reveals a one-dimensional interpretation of the story. Again, think of Adam not as the first human, but as the representative human, the natural human, the typical human.

Adam is simply you and me. When Paul writes *just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned*, he

means to say that we share in Adam's sin and its consequences merely because we all participate in the messiness of humanity. We are born to pay attention to our appetites and seek their satisfaction, born to tend to the needs of flesh and blood. We can do nothing else. Without the law we wouldn't even know anything else. We are simply part of natural, typical humanity along for the ride with Adam. The ride can be fun and thrilling. It can be painful and pleasurable. It can be dangerous and terrifying for as long as it lasts. It lasts longer for some than it does for others, but the end result is always the same: death. Adam's ride always ends in death. The mortality rate for humankind is still one-hundred percent.

Last Wednesday we began the season of Lent by imposing ashes on the forehead of anyone who came forward, saying each time, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." No matter how I've tried over the years to wring a hopeful meaning out of the phrase, essentially what it says is this: "Remember that you are going to die." It's always interesting to note how people react. One young woman looked me squarely in the eyes, and before I could impose the ashes, she said, "Hi!" Others offered reverent replies after receiving the ashes. Some said "thanks be to God," or "Amen," or "Yes I am." Then a young mother came forward with a toddler in her arms. After imposing the ashes on the woman's forehead with the appropriate words, I reached for the toddler. The little boy turned his head, tried to squirm his way free from his mother's arms, and began shouting, "NO!" No way was he going to let me touch his forehead with the mark of mortality. Frankly, I like the toddler's reaction to the ashes. We should recoil from them, even as we receive them. Stop the car. I'm getting out!

Stop the car. I've had enough. Welcome to Lent. Lent is a season of the church year during which Christians try to practice self denial. Why? Well, it seems to me that the challenge is to examine how we are each participating in humanity's ride to destruction, and we search for ways to drive more responsibly. Food and drink are the classic battlegrounds of Lent. We overindulge and our physical well-being suffers because of it. It's time to cut back or cut it out altogether. Thus, Lent becomes an exercise of mind over matter, of will power over jelly doughnuts, of prayer and fasting over another stiff drink. To be sure, your body may rejoice at the end of a well-kept Lent, and your spirits may be better too. But it seems to me that what we are doing along these lines is merely trying to prolong the ride – to move the day of reckoning as far down the road as possible. Actually, the Lenten business of resisting temptation and practicing self denial aims at something else. The goal of repentance is nothing short of stopping the car and getting out of it.

Lent is a life and death matter. Lent asks us if we will continue on the same old ride. Every year on the first Sunday in Lent we hear the story of Jesus in the wilderness facing Satan's manifold temptations. With great understatement, Matthew tells us that after forty days and forty nights of fasting in the desert, Jesus was hungry. It was then, when Jesus was at his most vulnerable point, that the devil presented him with an array of cunning, calculated temptations. In the two-thousand years since Matthew wrote his gospel, preachers and Biblical scholars have examined and re-examined each of the temptations from every conceivable angle. I will spare you yet one more detailed analysis, other than to say this: it strikes me that with the first temptation – the temptation involving bread – the devil's intention was to keep Jesus along for the ride with Adam. "Pay attention to your appetites, Jesus. Tend to the needs of flesh and blood. Let's not forget that you are a natural man – a very good one – but a natural man, nonetheless. Have some bread, Jesus. It would be the easiest, most natural thing in the world for you to do." *But Jesus answered, "It is written, 'one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

What was Jesus accomplishing by fasting in the desert and resisting the devil's temptations? I hardly think that weight loss and a healthier physique were his goals. To be sure, Jesus had a physique. He was a natural man with a body of flesh and blood. He was Adam through

and through. But as one of our hymns today states, Jesus was “a second Adam to the fight.” The first Adam, who was the type of the one to come, relied on bread alone. The devil tempted Adam and Eve, and they ate. But the second Adam – Jesus – was not content to live on bread alone. He was not willing to go along on the same old ride. By resisting Satan’s temptations, he stopped the car, got out of it, and tried to take as many with him as would follow. He opened the door to everlasting life. That’s the free gift: the open door and the call to follow.

In saying that Jesus got out of the car, let me be clear about something. Jesus embraced humanity. He loved his people. He wasn’t a hermit who quit life and watched as the world drove itself into a tree. Far from it. He wept over Jerusalem when he saw his people careening towards destruction (Luke 19:41). “*Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace,*” he lamented. He wanted people to come along with him on a new ride, to participate in the new humanity, to become citizens of a new kingdom – the kingdom of God. Indeed, Jesus wanted to bring all of humanity safely home – home to his heavenly Father’s house. At the same time, as much as Jesus wanted people to join him, his way was not coercion. He would not force anyone to follow. His offer was and is a free gift. People would have to choose between staying with Adam, and coming along with him.

In today’s reading from Romans, Paul puts the same gift before us. But we have to choose to accept it. The choice is this: Adam or Christ? The way of Adam leads to sin, condemnation, and death. The way of Christ is the gift of righteousness, grace, and life. St. Paul wrote: *Therefore, just as the one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so the one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.* Adam or Christ? Death or life? Door number-one, or door number-two? It sure sounds easy on paper. You and I know that real time repentance and turning to a better way is often easier said than done. But by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was tempted in every way as we are, yet did not sin, we are able to triumph over every evil, and to live no longer for ourselves alone, but for him who died for us and rose again. The door really is open.

It’s been over 40 years now since the auto accident that took the lives of four of my brother’s friends. To this day I still recall how the news resounded like a thunder clap through our little town. And I’ve wondered about the one passenger who decided to get out of the car and head towards home. What was the moment like? Was it hard to break free from his friends? Did he try to persuade any of the others to go with him? Perhaps he did, but the greater temptation inside the car was the thrill of the immediate ride. The terrifying truth is, it turned out to be a life and death decision for all of them.

St. Paul would say that for you and me, the decision between going along for the same old ride with Adam, and walking the narrow road with Christ is every bit as consequential. Adam or Christ? Door number-one or door number-two? Death or life?

The pilgrim way of Lent is the invitation to life. It is to die daily to the way of self. It is to live daily in the way of Christ’s love. It is to walk the road that Jesus trod. It is to wake in the Father’s glory, even in the dwelling place of God.