

An Easter Worth Celebrating, Part 1

The Easter season is upon us. This is the time of year when we remember the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I say that we “remember” the death and resurrection of Jesus because we don’t really “celebrate” these events. Something about the character of Easter makes us feel that we shouldn’t really be celebrating.

Christmas, as a Christian and public holiday, feels a whole lot more like celebrating. In fact, it’s interesting and perhaps instructive to reflect a bit on the relationship of Christmas to Easter.

When I was growing up, Christmas was my absolute favorite time of year, just like for many of you. And it’s easy to see why. As soon as Halloween was over, my mom would begin to magically release into our house what we commonly call “the Christmas spirit.” She’d get out the Christmas records and play them on the record-player – some of you may know what those things are. And Christmas-time was awesome because we had three weeks off of school! What could be better!? And since we had a huge extended family, we’d have several celebrations—most of them at our house. Our cousins would come over and we’d go down into the basement and chase each other around and play games and get into fights and then be called upstairs to pig out on tons of amazing food, after which we’d pile back downstairs to chase each other around and play games and get into more fights, only to be called back upstairs for a stunning array of glorious desserts.

And we’d get presents! And then we’d go back downstairs and chase each other around some more and play games and get into fights over one another’s presents! The fun was simply never-ending. And our cousins would stay late because no one had school, there was nothing to worry about. Time seemed to go on forever when you were a kid, especially at Christmas. In my memory, those were epic times. The way we celebrated Christmas told us that as far as holidays went, it was definitely the coolest, greatest, most amazing holiday in the world. Christmas was the King of Holidays.

Easter was Christmas, Jr. Sort of “mini-Christmas,” or, “wanna-be-Christmas.” We did loads of things the same, but the scale of everything was slightly smaller. Christmas had the advantage of getting presents, and the commercials for the cool toys all started around Thanksgiving, giving us a month to fantasize about getting the latest and greatest toys. But at Easter, the only really cool thing that a kid could get was a ton of chocolate, so the commercials for Cadbury Cream Eggs with the bunny that made noises like a chicken began about two weeks before Easter, representing our culture’s agreed-upon calculus that Easter is Christmas multiplied by .5. Further, there wasn’t really any “Easter spirit.” And for Easter you don’t get three weeks off of school—you just get a long weekend. We’d have all our family over and we’d have a huge meal and our cousins would be over and we’d go down into the basement and chase each other around and play games and then get into fights and we’d have a blast. And then we’d be called upstairs for the amazing food, after which we’d descend back into the basement to go wild, ascending once again for the staggering dessert offerings. But the post-dessert play time/fight time would be cut short, because we had school on Monday. Again, the Easter calculus—just like Christmas, but cut in half.

One final component of my Easter experience was the gifts. At Christmas we’d get loads of great stuff, it was wonderful! We always got toys, but then we’d get the gifts from certain relatives – the kind of gifts that comprise your training in what parents call “manners.” You’d open those certain presents and it’d be a sweater, or some new trousers, or a package of socks. And you’d have to

smile and say, “thanks, Grandma for this new sweater,” through gritted teeth, because you really wanted a new football or a new Atari game or a rifle or some Star Wars action figures.

For Easter, however, the gifts were quite different, representing the Christmas Jr. calculus, but with a twist. It wasn’t “toys + clothes,” but “candy + an outfit.” We’d get a basket of candy with that fake plastic purple grass stuff that you’d keep finding around the house for the next few weeks and then some dress socks and a shirt that would match my sisters’ dresses. I grew up with five sisters and no brothers, so every Easter they’d get matching dresses and I’d get a shirt that would match their dresses so that the yearly Easter picture consisted of 5 happy girls with matching dresses and bows in their pig-tails and one boy wearing a matching dress-shirt standing there with slumped shoulders and a grumpy look on his face.

I share with you these reminiscences of holidays past in order to highlight our culture’s way of thinking about Easter. Christmas is pure celebration, but Easter? We’re not so sure...

It seems to me that this uncertainty affects many Christians, as well. Christmas makes sense. The world needs God, and God sends Jesus to save His people!

But Easter moves in a different direction. Palm Sunday marks the joyful welcome of the Son of God. But by the end of the week, these same people put Him to death. It starts with celebration, but moves to horrible injustice and outrageous tragedy. Easter involves rejection, betrayal, violence, agony, torture, the injustice of the crucifixion of the innocent Son of God, and the horrific image of a bloodied and beaten corpse on a cross.

If there’s any emotion we attach to Easter, it’s guilt. After all, our sin led to Jesus’ death. The innocent Lamb of God was slain because of our self-deceived rebellion and our sin. It seems more fitting, therefore, that we “remember” Easter; or “observe” it – we’re not so convinced that Easter calls for outright celebration.

Today and tomorrow during chapel I want to discuss the logic of Easter. We believe that Jesus died and that God raised him from the dead, but I want to talk about just what happened when those things happened. We will first consider the biblical and theological context that makes Easter make sense, and then we’ll meditate on how these crucial events shape our lives today. And we will do all of this to demonstrate that Easter is indeed worth celebrating.

The Biblical Story as Context

To understand why God sent Jesus into the world, why Jesus died, and just what happened when God raised him from the dead, we need to set the context in the story of Scripture. And, we need to start at the beginning, with God’s intentions for humanity in his good creation.

Creation

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the world God created was good. It had order to it and it contained a seemingly infinite variety of wonders and beauties. God set Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden as a thriving, flourishing place that was teeming with life. And God set Adam and Eve over his creation as rulers, commanding them to cultivate it, drawing out all its

potential and making it even more fruitful. There was nothing but goodness and life and joy and delight, and the more humanity cultivated creation, the more there would be to enjoy.

And God intended for humanity to enjoy one another. Adam and Eve were given the thrilling task of ruling creation together, and they were to get to know one another and delight in one another as they did so.

Genesis 2-3 states four times that Adam and Eve were naked in the garden, indicating that God's intention for humanity was that we were to be completely open to each other. We were originally designed to give ourselves fully to one another to be completely known and explored. The more we were known, the more we'd be loved and appreciated. And our being known would not come at the expense of knowing the other—there was no "either/or," and there was no competition for attention. It was Adam's delight to know and love Eve; and it would thrill Eve to know and understand Adam fully. They gave complete attention to one another, listened to one another, attended one another's thoughts, fantasies, silly musings, deep reflections, inner workings, desires, dreams, and hopes. And God intended for us to be understood, to be listened to, to be validated, to have our dreams and hopes heard and treasured by others. That was the norm for human relationships, and it brought deep satisfaction.

Human relationships were supposed to be like this because that's how God relates within himself as Father, Son, and Spirit. Humanity was to reflect the life of God on earth. Just as each Person of the Trinity loves and delights in the others, so humans were to love and delight in one another, experiencing the twin joys of discovering and being discovered, delighting in and having others delight in us. All of us have that deep, overpowering desire to send out our heart to another person – and to have that love returned. There is simply nothing else like it.

The thrill of such a relationship in early bloom can be so powerful it can make you act like a very silly person. If you don't believe me, go sit for a while on a bench at the town park on a sunny afternoon in the Spring, or perhaps wander down by the Indian Mound. One of the striking features of Springtime in Cedarville is the appearance of young couples walking blissfully through the trees, snuggled up together on the park benches, floating dreamily along the creek, wandering aimlessly down the bike path, and getting cozy on the uncomfortable rocks by the waterfall in back of the fire station. It's incredible behavior. Young couples in love playfully shove each other, laugh hysterically at jokes that aren't really that funny, engage in mock sword fights with sticks found on the ground, and chase each other around playground structures designed for 7-year olds.

Much could be said about the experience of "falling in love" and the embarrassing associated practices, but for now I'll just highlight the fact that delighting in another person and being delighted in by another person is a part of our experience that God fully intends for us. What he does not intend is that it would ever diminish, cease, become manipulative, or lead to destructive and self-destructive behaviors.

One of the wonders about God's original creation was that it was not a world of limited goods. There was unlimited beauty and unlimited pleasure, both in the creation itself and in one another. The more they made creation flourish, the more creation produced far more than they needed. And the more Adam and Eve got to know each other, the more they delighted in one another. They would never get to the end of enjoying one another. And they would never have to say things like, "look, we always talk about what you're thinking about, when do I get to share my thoughts?" After all, what would be the rush? They had unlimited time. And their experience taught them that

knowing Adam more meant more delight for both of them; and knowing Eve more meant that their shared pleasure would only increase. The logic of creation meant that there was infinitely far more there than they could imagine there was. And the result of that logic—both with regard to creation and to one another—was sheer delight.

And humanity was designed to be completely open before God, hiding nothing, being completely open to knowing God and being known by God. If Eve ever said to Adam, “God saw what you did!” Adam would exclaim, “I know, isn’t that great!?” and not, “I know, isn’t **that** great!?”

This original condition of creation both glorified and delighted God. It thrilled His heart to watch humanity fulfill His intentions for His world.

Fall

Sadly, Adam and Eve were led astray and disobeyed God. And when they did so, they unleashed an entire host of destructive dynamics into creation that affect us still.

After their rebellion we begin to see behaviors that were never supposed to be part of human experience. There is now self-awareness. They are paralyzed by fear in the face of their vulnerability. “Whoa, we’re naked!” They hide themselves from one another. That’s not supposed to happen!

Their self-awareness leads to paranoia. Their behavior is pathological—insane. Think about it – Eden is a place of complete and total goodness; there are no threats, no reason for fear or anxiety. But they’re freaking out with suspicion and they’re hiding! Why? There’s nothing to fear!

Sin is madness. It makes you crazy. It makes you look at God’s good gifts and see them as threats. It makes you look at a friend and see an enemy.

We do that all the time, don’t we? We assume the worst about each other. “I know what he’s thinking. I know she’s up to something! I know he said that, but I don’t believe him!” Sin turns us into fools, pathetic and puny caricatures of what we were supposed to be according to God’s design.

Adam and Eve view one another no longer as gifts from God, but as competitors, as threats to be eliminated or maybe just controlled. But certainly to be kept at arm’s length.

They also hide from God. They were supposed to be totally open to God and vulnerable before Him, but they now see Him as a threat! He is their source of life, but now they run away from His life-giving and sustaining presence. When God shows up you run. This is absolute madness. We look at what sustains us and what is good for us and we see it as a threat and flee from it. This is pure insanity.

Why do things play out this way? According to Paul in Romans 5, when Adam and Eve sinned, they unwittingly unleashed on creation the evil cosmic powers of Sin and Death. Sin and Death are like dark shadowy characters on the stage that affect and infect everything. They don’t belong here. They are cosmic hijackers of all things good. They are parasites. Sin and Death overwhelm and infect both Adam and Eve. Their bodies will now break down and die. And the networks of relationships are overwhelmed and infected by Sin and Death. Humans are now alienated from God

and from one another, and there's a relentless dynamic of destruction that multiplies at a bewildering rate and that is at work on so many levels.

Speech patterns are corrupted by Sin and Death, assumptions about one another, thoughts about others, plans, intentions, motivations, non-verbal communication—everything is corrupted in one way or another.

Adam and Eve feel it right away. There's something foul in the air, something sinister and threatening. Notice how they respond instinctively to their new situation.

Their God-given desire for happiness and vitality and joy is still there, but now it's perverted. It becomes an instinct for survival, leading to violence against others. When Adam and Eve now look out on God's creation, they see a very different world—it is now a world of limited goods. There isn't enough to go around! Now there is selfishness and competition. "I've got to get mine – what if she gets it first!" In fact, we probably had the first game of "I had it first!" in the white space between Genesis 3 and Genesis 4.

It's amazing how we never have to be taught how to play the "I had it first" game. We know it by nature. It's our first attempt at logic and argumentation—a sort of try-out to see if we want to go on to become lawyers. Our sibling or friend has a toy that we want, so we try to grab it. They respond by appealing to the well-established principle of prior possession—"I had it first." Unmoved by this primal legal maneuver, we bravely offer the counter-response of appeal to prior intention. It sounds like this: "Well, I meant to play with it!" This is indeed a clever move, shifting the debate to the unseen realm of personal motivation. The only tactic that remains is the triumphal assertion of the law of rhetoric as reality: "I called it!" I, myself, have had great experience in these sorts of debates and have witnessed them fairly regularly among my own children. We have raised them well.

Sadly, the attitudes and behaviors associated with this game do not stop when childhood passes. Even as adults we re-live Genesis 3 daily. We do this because we all feel that we're in a world of limited goods. "If he has it, that means I don't. If something good comes his way, that's a loss for me." This is the destructive logic of envy. In the Garden, there was more than enough to go around, but now we have an "either-or" logic at work. The new norm is grab all that you can, look out for Number 1, self-protection, survival, selfishness, grasping for power and control, domination, trickery, deceit.

We don't know if Adam and Eve played the "I had it first" game, but we do see them playing the blame game. None of us are ever taught this game, either, but we know its rules and strategies perfectly. Who made that mess in the kitchen? It wasn't me! It's his fault! Our church isn't the perfect church! It's the pastor's fault! It's the peoples' fault! My work-place isn't what it should be – It's his fault! It's their fault! My marriage isn't fulfilling! Well, he's always...! If she would just...! My relationship with my roommate is a disaster! I didn't do anything! You wouldn't believe what he's like! This community isn't what it used to be or what it should be! It's his fault! It's their fault!

The blame game reveals to us an anti-creation logic. Something is wrong and the way you fix it is to assign blame and do damage to, or get rid of, that person. Adam says, "She's the problem—get rid of her and everything will be better."

According to the logic of creation, there's more than enough to go around—a world of unlimited goods! There's more stuff here than we imagined! But things have changed...

Banishment

Genesis 3 then depicts one of the most horrible scenes in the entire Bible. God banishes Adam and Eve from the garden. He sends them away. We all know how horrible it is when friendships take a painful turn, or when people turn their backs on us or give us the cold shoulder. How it must have hurt when God—our very life—told Adam and Eve, “Out!”

This banishment is significant, because according to Scripture, we are not in the world that we are supposed to be in. We as individuals are alienated from God and from each other. But more has gone wrong than simply that. We live in a world where God is not present the way He was supposed to be present. We do not experience God's nearness the way we were supposed to. Sin and Death—God's cosmic enemies—have hijacked and taken over bodies, networks of relationships, and have perverted the entire creation. Mindsets are perverted; social networks are messed up; whole cultures have been led astray. We are not in the world the way we're supposed to be, and we all feel it.

I want you to notice, at this point, these two ways of life emerging into view:

On one hand, we have the logic of creation, as seen in Genesis 1 & 2: A thriving world of unlimited goods; ever-increasing enjoyment of God and delight in one another.

On the other hand, we have the logic of the fall, as depicted in Genesis 3: A world of limited goods; broken relationships; self-protection; selfishness.

What does God think of this? Is He satisfied with humanity living in the world of Genesis 3?

Israel

God answers this question by calling into being the nation of Israel. God called Israel to be a “holy” people. They were to be different. They were not supposed to see the world as one of limited goods. This is, after all, the world of the Creator God, the one who owns the cattle on a thousand hills! So, if your brother or sister is hungry, feed them! If they are in need, you help them out! When you live like that, you are affirming that this world is still God's world and that when you really open your eyes to it, there's more than enough to go around.

And they weren't supposed to cultivate power and strength and self-protection. They were to reach out to the nations and demonstrate God's redemptive love. They were not to focus on survival, but on servant-hood. They were to maintain their very distinctive diet so that they remained a particular and set-apart people, but they were supposed to find ways to open themselves up to the nations to show them how to be the nations under the Lordship of the Creator God.

Israel heard these instructions and very quickly realized how risky it was. “There are giants in the land! Have you seen those people!? They'll take advantage of us! They'll enslave us! They'll kill us! We'll get hurt!”

But the Creator God told them that if they lived this utterly risky way of life, that God Himself would be their protection. He would bless those who developed friendships with Israel, and He would fend off their enemies. Living the way God told them to would take pretty serious faith.

But Israel failed. They did not want to be a nation “unlike” the nations. They preferred to be like the nations—mistreating the poor and neglecting the orphan and the widow. They chose to live in a world of limited goods where you had to look out for your own. They lived in a Genesis 3 world according to the rules of Genesis 3. This way of life affirmed the supremacy of the petty, vindictive false gods of the nations. They refused to be a nation who worshiped the one true Creator God whose creation thrives with even more than you can imagine. They were called to be a people of Genesis 1-2 in a Genesis 3 world, but they failed.

Israel’s failure revealed that the creation was still enslaved to Sin and Death. Israel proved no match for these sinister parasites. Solving the problem of rebellious human hearts and an entire creation dominated by Sin and Death would require a radical move of God.

Jesus

God makes such a move by sending Jesus. God Himself enters the drama of creation, taking on human form and experiencing creation’s enslavement. Jesus did many things and fulfilled many roles, but one major question the incarnation addresses is this: Does God still want us to live the Genesis 1-2 life in a Genesis 3 world? Creation is enslaved and the world is broken—is it still God’s intention that we live according to His design for humanity?

The life Jesus lives is a resounding “yes!” God sends Jesus to live the truly human life that faithfully fulfilled God’s intentions.

The Jewish culture into which Jesus was born was stuck in Genesis 3. They had been kicked around and ruled by a series of pagan powers and were currently being oppressed by the Romans. One of the insidious things about Sin is how it provokes further sin. When you are sinned against, you are so enraged in your spirit that the only ways you can imagine responding are by sinning. The Jews had been mistreated for generations and they had cultivated a deep hatred for the Romans and longed for their destruction. This mindset not only enslaved them, but it shaped their visions of Messiah. “When he shows up, He’ll wipe our enemies off the map!” And, as Jesus notes in the Sermon on the Mount, they had been taught, “Love your neighbor, but hate your enemy.”

And if you asked various Jews why God’s Kingdom hadn’t arrived yet, you’d get variations on the blame game. Ask a Pharisee and he’d tell you, “God’s Kingdom isn’t here yet because sinners aren’t honoring God the way we are!” Ask a patriotic zealot and he’d tell you that God hasn’t sent His Kingdom yet because there are so many compromised leaders playing power politics with the Romans.

Jesus comes to a Jewish culture that accommodated to a Genesis 3 world—blaming others for the state of things, captive to anger, and living lives of petty vengeance, power-grabbing, and selfishness.

But Jesus is different. He treats everyone with dignity, regarding them as deep reservoirs of richness to be discovered, explored, and treasured. And he refuses to observe His culture’s

perverted social norms. He meets with Nicodemus the Pharisee, a respected teacher, but He also shares meals with prostitutes and tax-collectors—some of the most despised people in that day. The true human doesn't evaluate people based on their social status. That's a Genesis 3 behavior and Jesus has no time for it.

And Jesus will not tolerate the blame game. In John 9, Jesus and His disciples come across a man who is reduced to begging because he has been blind from birth. The disciples immediately ask, "who is to blame for this? This man or his parents?" Jesus responds by reframing the issue. Don't ask, "who is to blame?" Ask instead, "how can God be glorified in this situation?"

And Jesus goes about proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom. There's a new realm arriving into God's enslaved creation. It's the Kingdom of God and it isn't at all what the Jews expected! You don't have to be all cleaned up to get in – anyone can enter! It's a radically new reality oriented by God's restoring power and by the logic of creation.

What sort of things do you do in the Kingdom of God? You forgive. Give up leverage in relationships. Refuse to enslave yourself in your own bitterness. Receive God's forgiveness and grant it to others. If people have harmed you or treated you badly, don't scheme for ways to get them back. Love your enemies and pray for those who mistreat you, who gossip about you, who persecute you.

According to Jesus, enemy-love is the most strategic way to imitate God Himself, who sends His blessings on the just and unjust. You experience true freedom when you grant it to others. Retaliation is the pathway of enslavement to Sin and Death.

Furthermore, Jesus says, share your stuff and forgive debts! Do people owe you money, let it go—give your stuff away as gifts and allow others to freely use what is yours. And don't be consumed with anxiety. God owns the cattle on a thousand hills, right? God looks after the sparrows, doesn't he? Don't hoard your stuff.

Furthermore, Jesus says that it's fine to invite your friends over for meals, but you should also invite the poor. "What!?! Living that way will alienate my friends and family! I'll lose social status in my community! I've got to keep up appearances! I can't be seen with those people!" But Jesus says, "Anyone who gives up friends and family finds that in the Kingdom they get friends and family times a thousand!"

Jesus also gives a number of creation-logic performances, illustrating this way of life. What do you do when 5,000 people need to eat, and you only have bread and fish for one? Well, if you live in Genesis 3, you might say, "Let's close our eyes and spend a few minutes in silent prayer—no one looking around," and then you grab the food and take off running while no one's looking! But if you live in the Kingdom, if you inhabit Genesis 1-2, you find that there's more than enough to go around. It just takes Kingdom imagination to see that all things are possible.

Jesus is calling for a radically new way to live—but it goes back to the very beginning. It's a way to live that has been lost from view because of the corruption of creation. Jesus is living and teaching the logic of creation. There's more than enough to go around. Live in God's world, not in a world of limited goods. If you try to hold on to your life, you lose it. It's when you lose your life that you truly find it.

We'll see tomorrow how an enslaved creation responds to God's performance of true humanity, and how God triumphs over Sin and Death.

For now, I'll close with this simple prayer: Father, grant us grace by Your Spirit to live in Your world according to Your intentions for us, and to receive your very own joy as we live with open hands. In the name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.