

THIS WEEK'S KEYWORD

Excuses

All of us are guilty of doing it from time to time: Making up lame excuses for not doing what we're supposed to do.

I think we hit our pinnacle on this issue in our teenage years. I know I did. And how do I know they were awful? Because I can't think of a single one as I write this. That tells the excuses I came up with weren't remotely true, because you tend to remember real events and real reasons.

And, of course, there are some real reasons why we don't or can't do things. But if we look at those situations truthfully, more often than we want to admit we likely would find that what we provide are not real reasons, but excuses.

We tend to make excuses for when we want to avoid something, such as a task we don't want to complete or a social engagement where we just don't want to go. Or we make excuses to skip something that seems overwhelming to us. Rather than face it head-on, we try to avoid it altogether.

This is Holy Week. We will look at several stories from the Bible this week that involve excuses. In some cases, the people show their human flaws and make excuses when God calls them to do something, or when God tells them to avoid a behavior. We'll juxtapose that behavior with what Jesus did, which was not to make any excuses that would have allowed him to avoid the cross and instead walked straight toward the danger, knowing full well what was going to happen.

Let's start by looking at the first of two extremes.

Adam and Eve are in the garden, and life seems to be bliss. They are in paradise. They have no reason to feel shame. They are able to experience all of the key words we've studied so far regarding their relationship with God: They are connected with God, they trust that God has their best interest at heart, they have obeyed (to this point) the directive not to eat from the tree in the center of the garden, and they understand that God is the one providing for them.

But then all innocence is lost. The snake talks to the woman, and she eats of the tree. The man was right there next to her and also ate.

When Adam and Eve are caught by God, they turn immediately to excuses. They didn't repent. They didn't beg God for forgiveness. They just started pointing fingers.

The man — who was clearly right there and knew exactly from where the fruit came — blamed the woman. The woman blamed the snake.

As a result, sin entered the world, and the relationship between humanity and God was greatly changed. A great chasm opened up between God and the creation, and the entirety of the rest of our scriptures are devoted to the work by God to reconcile with humanity. Each time the people were given opportunities, they failed to see it. So, God eventually took the ultimate step and sent his only begotten son, Jesus, the Christ, to earth to atone for the sin of all people — those who came before us, all of us living today, and those who are yet to be born.

Contract the excuses of Adam and Eve with the lack of excuses from Jesus in another garden.

Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane with his inner circle of disciples. He knows what is about to happen to him. He has seen the pain of others and understands well the humiliation that comes with crucifixion. He clearly doesn't want to go through with this plan. We know that because he asks God, "My Father, if it's possible, take this cup of suffering away from me."

But what happens next is critical for all of humanity. Jesus already knows the answer is "no" when he says this prayer. While discouraged by that answer, Jesus doesn't make any excuses as to why he should avoid the pain of the cross. Instead, he says, "However — not what I want but what you want."

In other words, Jesus knows God wants humanity finally to be reconciled with its Creator. Jesus knows this is the method God chose to make that happen. As we'll see Thursday, Jesus could have escaped. He could have avoided the cross. But he chose his love for you and me, and for all of humanity, over himself. He accomplished the mission the Father had given him.

With no excuses.

SIXTH SUNDAY OF LENT

Placing Blame

Scripture — Genesis 3

Questions for Reflection

1. Why do you suppose God placed the forbidden tree where Adam and Eve could gain access to it? What do you think it says about the freedom God has given humanity as part of the Creation?
2. Take a look at the punishments God handed down from verses 14 to 19. What do they tell us about what life was like for Adam and Eve in the garden before they disobeyed God?
3. How might Jesus be seen as taking the place of the Tree of Life mentioned in verses 22 and 24? What hope does that imagery give you today?

MONDAY

But ... but ... but ...

Scripture — Exodus 3:1 – 4:17

Questions for Reflection

1. Moses asks, “Who am I to accomplish this task?” When was a time you felt you were called by God to serve in some way but didn’t think you were up to the task? How would you do things differently?
2. Then Moses asks, “What happens if the people don’t believe me?” When have you experienced doubt about if you will be accepted by a group? How did the situation work out? What do you wish had happened differently?
3. Finally, Moses said he has a problem talking — either a speech impediment or slow to form thoughts. What is a gift or talent that you wish you had? Why?

TUESDAY

Too young and too small

Scripture — Jeremiah 1, Judges 6:11-24

Questions for Reflection

1. In our lesson on Trust, we learned that Jeremiah bought a field despite the siege under way in Jerusalem. What was his excuse for not wanting to obey God’s call for his service?
2. Also, in our lesson on Trust, we learned how Gideon eventually learned that what God calls into action cannot fail. Look at Judges 6:15. When have you felt like an issue is simply too big for you to make a difference? Why did you feel that way?
3. Both Jeremiah and Gideon eventually served God as they were called. How might you feel called to serve God and the church as we prepare to leave this season of Lent?

WEDNESDAY

Signs of Belief?

Scripture — Acts 15:1-35

Questions for Reflection

1. Why might Jewish converts to Christianity have been so adamant about men being circumcised if they were to be part of the early church? What kinds of expectations do we hold today of new believers?
2. Peter, Paul and others saw the requirement for circumcision to be a barrier to new believers to join the church. Think about how your church functions. What barriers might there be that prevent new people from becoming part of the community of faith?
3. People were sent out with the news that the church was open to all believers, regardless of circumcision. What message would you send out to people today to explain how the church is open to all people? List some of the things people may think are forbidden for people who are part of a church.

THURSDAY

Washing Feet

Scripture — John 13:1-20

Questions for Reflection

1. If you knew you had only one day left to live, how would you spend it? Share some of the details.
2. Jesus knew it was his last day, and yet he didn't flee. In fact, he washed feet. What does that simple act tell you about Jesus and how he wants us to act toward others?
3. Jesus says he has given us an example. List three to five things that you know about Jesus that you hope to emulate in the days after Lent and beyond.

FRIDAY

Betrayed

Scripture — Matthew 26:36-46

Questions for Reflection

1. Jesus seemed upset that his friends fell asleep during his time of great stress. When have you felt betrayed by a friend? How difficult was it to forgive them?
2. Jesus could have walked roughly the length of a football field to the east of the Garden of Gethsemane and escaped to the Judean wilderness. How does his decision to stay and allow himself to be arrested make you feel as a follower of Christ?
3. Jesus tells his sleeping friends, “Get up. Let’s go. Look, here comes my betrayer.” In other words, he knew exactly what was happening. What do you think was Judas’ role in this plot? Do you think he knew he was betraying Jesus? Or can you think of any other motive for his actions?

SATURDAY

Who is he?

Scripture — Luke 22:54-62

Questions for Reflection

1. Why do you think Peter followed Jesus as he was led away? What did he hope to accomplish by entering the courtyard of the high priest’s house?
2. Peter denies Jesus three times out of fear for his own safety. We don’t have to fear for our safety, so why do we sometimes deny Jesus — especially by not speaking up on matters of faith?
3. The rooster crows, and Peter immediately realizes what he has done. When have you realized after the fact that you betrayed or denied someone? What did you do to try to rebuild the relationship?