
From the Wilderness, A Snakeskin Model of Sin

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler

Lent 1 – Year B

Sin has gotten a bad rap. For some reason or another, during the past fifty years, sin has gotten a bad rap. Sin. Maybe it was the severe fundamentalists who abused the word, turning every fun thing humans have ever done into an occasion for going to hell. Maybe it was the secular liberals who went too far in the other direction and exaggerated the notion that people really can be good if they want to. The obsessed fundamentalists find evil and wrongdoing everywhere; the secular liberals think no one is really all that bad. They are both wrong.

I remember a popular story about “Silent Cal,” President Calvin Coolidge, the man of few words. It seems President Coolidge attended church one Sunday, while his wife stayed at home. His wife, trying to make conversation when he came home, asked him about the experience. She asked, “What did the preacher preach about?” Coolidge offered a one word reply, “Sin.” His wife wanted more explanation.” Well,” she pressed on, “What did the preacher say about sin?” Coolidge replied again, “He was against it.”

This morning, I want to try to rescue that word, the word “sin,” and what it means. I want to preach about Sin. However, unlike Coolidge’s preacher, I do not want to preach against Sin. I am for Sin. I want to redeem Sin. Christians, and human beings everywhere, need a healthy concept of Sin if we are to be full and fruitful citizens of this planet.

On this First Sunday of Lent, after the ashes of Ash Wednesday, after the Great Litany of forgiveness that we have just sung while processing around the church, we hear the Gospel of Mark’s very short account of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. Mark’s gospel is a gospel of few words; maybe it is the Calvin Coolidge of the gospels.

Without describing the actual temptations, Mark’s version says merely that “the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him” (Mark 1:12-13).

What is the wilderness? If the reality of sin has been forgotten in today’s world, the reality of wilderness has been even more forgotten. So I am preaching today not just for sin, but also for wilderness. I actually like the wilderness. In the wilderness, one sees wild beasts like snakes and eagles. I have also seen angels waiting around to minister in the shadows. I have seen pain and dying in the wilderness, but I have also seen beauty and new life. I have seen bones and skeletons in the wilderness, but I have also admired fresh skin and growth. Yes, we often think of the wilderness as scary and severe, filled with untamed terrors and snakes. But the wilderness is also a place where we learn how things grow.

It is in the wilderness where we learn the truth about ourselves; and, sometimes, the scariest things in the wilderness are inside ourselves. Like Jesus, it is in the wilderness that we learn what our temptations are. And temptations teach us what our sin is.

What is sin? The conventional definition is that sin is something we do that is inherently wrong. That is true to a point. Sin involves actions that are certainly wrong. In my thoughts and attitudes, I sin when I treat people with less than respect. When I think ill thoughts and mention less than honorable things. When my actions do not grace other people. When I waste the resources of those people around me. When I waste the earth’s resources.

But what makes all these actions wrong is that they interfere with my growth, and the growth of others, towards God. Broadly speaking, sin is what gets in the way of relationship with God.

But I have another model for what sin is, a model I learned in the wilderness. I was out in the woods one day, in the wild, when I spotted a snakeskin, the leftover skin that a snake had shed. Yes, it was bit frightening at first. snakeskins can scare you! But there it was, lodged in between two small branches of a limb. That snake had simply slid between those branches and slipped right out of that old skin.

When snakes shed their skin, a new skin has already been growing under the old one for a long time. When I find an old snakeskin in the woods, and I am reminded that the actual shedding of skin is not painful at all; it is a natural shedding of the old to make way for the new.

So it is that the wilderness has taught me about sin. That snakeskin is how I want to define sin and the confession of sin. I believe in the confession of sin according to “the snakeskin model.” We are meant to confess sin as regularly, and as smoothly, as a snake sheds his skin. Sin is a part of life, because sin is the old snakeskin. The snake simply grows through the old skin, sloughs it off, and slides away.

Sin is what gets in the way of our growth toward God. That, in fact, is my definition of sin. “Sin” is whatever is keeping us from our next experience of God. Sure, on the face of it, sin must be the bad things in our lives. It gets in the way of our knowing God. But the realization of sin is not a bad thing at all. To move through sin, to be able to abandon sin, means to be able to face it, to acknowledge it – and then to let it go. When we visit the wilderness, like Jesus did, this process occurs all the time.

There is nothing so refreshing as letting go. “Letting go” is what forgiveness is supposed to mean. In fact, literally, in the Greek language, that is what the word “forgive,” means: “to let go, to release.” There is nothing so refreshing as letting go of sin, letting go of that which is prohibiting us from experiencing grace and glory and love.

In this life, in this human body, wonderful as it is, there are always things which we need to let go of. They are not always bad things or clearly antagonistic activities. They are simply activities or behaviors that we need to slough off, like the dead skin cells that our bodies slough off every day.

When I confess sin each day—and believe me—I usually have a lot to confess, I am sloughing off the old, shedding the old skin, so that I can live more properly into the new skin that God is preparing for this old soul. Sometimes, what was right for me in one stage of life is wrong for me in another stage of life. I must shed the old sin like the butterfly sheds the once beautiful chrysalis cocoon.

Sin is the old night, the old day, that we cast off in the morning in order to welcome the new. Sin is the shell, or the dead exoskeleton, of some animal going through a metamorphosis. There are occasions in our human lives, too, when we must shed the old in order to prepare for the new. The casting off of sin is part of the ordinary rhythm of life.

All around us, the world dies and is reborn. The moon wanes and waxes. Leaves fall off trees for a season of dormancy. Tides come in and out. Bodies grow and then they die. From their remnants, and from their descendants, new life emerges. Sometimes we need wilderness to realize those rhythms again.

When I confess sin, I am also saying that I admit the ebb and flow of God’s creation. I admit that I must die to something. I admit that I must die to something today so that I can know resurrection tomorrow.

The healthy admission of sin, then, is also the healthy preparation for grace. We do not know the awesome grace of God without first clearing the way, casting off the skin of the old, so that the skin of the new can grow. The process is a rhythm of dying and rising. If we dare to live in the wilderness, living into God’s dying and rising each day, we just might be in right relationship with the God of truth, and with God’s earth, and with God’s people.

Oh! A few years ago, we had a mistake in the church bulletin. A typographical error, a typo (a sin!). During our weekly previews of the service leaflets, someone spotted it; and we dutifully corrected it. But I kind of wish we had left it in. It was the title of the Sunday hymn: “There’s a wideness in God’s mercy.” But the typo said, “There’s a wilderness in God’s mercy.”

I wish we had left it in that way. There is a wilderness in God's mercy. And there is God's mercy in the wilderness.

AMEN.

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