

way of asking for the grace to reach past the serpent, past the tree, to once again experience the goodness of the garden God created.

The experience of failure or fall often leads us forward, and toward God. Toward calling on God in our honesty about how we ate the fruit. Or we trusted our own wisdom too much. Or we ignored all the good advice we got. In that honesty, there is space, possibility, and hope for God to create something new. That new creation will not look the same. The garden is different now; we are different now. We are changed by our failures. The pieces cannot always be put back together the same way again. But the story of faith, the ongoing story of God's beloved community, is that God promises to make all things new. God promises not to leave us flailing around in our fallen failures, but God will indeed breathe new life into us.

This process is not exactly what I would call *failing forward*. But there is movement between the fall and the new creation; between the sin that we cannot fix on our own and the possibility for rising; dare we call it, the possibility of resurrection. God's grace leads us on the pilgrimage of setting down our stones and turning, to journey by a new way. Creation and fall; fall and re-creation are not just once and for all events. They are experiences of faith that happen throughout our lives. We give thanks that the breath of God calls us into a new kind of life, over and over again.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church  
of Royal Oak

September 8, 2024

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

“A New Creation”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Genesis 2:4b-7, 15-17; 3:1-8

The Camino de Santiago is a pilgrimage route through Spain on which Christian pilgrims have traveled for hundreds of years. Pilgrims hike the route for days or weeks, with packs on their backs, visiting holy sites and seeking a profound spiritual experience. On one part of the route, pilgrims carry with them not just water and bedrolls, maps, band-aids and trail mix, but also a stone. These stones are symbols of regrets, mistakes, grief, sin. Pilgrims then leave their stone behind at the top of a mountain called Cruz de Ferro, the Iron Cross. Photos from the mountain show it littered with stones, flowers, shells, and rocks, many of which are painted with words that describe the particular hardship or regret that the pilgrim carried with them. Some of the rocks are surprisingly large, when you consider the fact that they had to be carried many, many miles in a pilgrim's pack.

As writer and pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber reflected after her visit to the site, “Both times I have stood at this sacred place I have wept. It’s like standing on a mountain comprised of human grief and regret and perhaps in some cases, also hope. This time, seeing stones on which are written names and prayers and pleas for forgiveness—seeing an empty wine bottle and a small baggie of prescription pills, I wondered about each person’s story... Here there is only deep, human longing; a crying out for something bigger than our remorse and failure, bigger than our loss and sorrow, bigger than addiction and cancer and grievance.”<sup>1</sup>

The pile of stones at Cruz de Ferro is a lived illustration of the passage we read in Genesis 3. The Iron Cross on the pilgrimage route is a place where people acknowledge the truth of the story of Eve, Adam, and the serpent, even when we believe the scriptural account is something like a holy metaphor, not a history textbook. The stones people carry with them are like the fruit of the tree, once eaten. They represent the brokenness of our human lives, which often comes about by our own mistakes and

1 Nadia Bolz-Weber, “Cruz de Ferro,” *The Corners newsletter*, June 4, 2024.

2 Greg Phelan, “What ‘Failing Forward’ Means and What to Make of It,” *Common Good Magazine*, April 1, 2024.

3 Ibid.

hubris, or our own pride and recklessness; and sometimes, by the cards life deals us or the circumstances that are out of our control.

We usually call this part of the Genesis story the *fall*. The fall from grace, the fall into sin, the fall from the goodness of creation into a life of separation from God. But we speak about it as if the fall was a once and for all event. A historical moment in time, long ago. This is the same way we tend to read the creation stories in the Bible, too. God created the creation. And then, after that, God was done.

But I want us to consider a different way to think about these stories today. I want us to see how these stories are not only reporting on something in the past. Maybe these stories do not just seek to explain how things started long ago; or how a ‘perfect’ world got broken, way back when. Maybe they also describe our ongoing experiences of faith today. Because the Genesis stories are describing something you and I experience all the time: creation and fall; brokenness and re-creation. We see God create every day in our own lives. We witness the creation of loving relationships, new little lives born among us, the birthing of new communities, and the start of fresh journeys. We also experience many *falls*—relationships we failed at; good deeds we skirted; harsh words we spoke when we thought we knew best; ways we participate in systemic harm every day, by our actions and inactions. We live with these stories of creation and fall in our bodies and minds every day.

When we think of these stories as ongoing and alive in our day to day living, then we also realize they are not separate stories. They cannot be read on their own; creation and fall do not stand alone. This world God has made, this world in which God is present in every nook and cranny - it is beautiful and wonderful. The people God has placed in it are endlessly interesting and unique. The created plants and animals store secrets and wonder beyond our imagining. The world God has made is good. And, and, and, it is also so obviously true that our experiences in this world are often not good. Bombs are exploding and killing people probably this very hour in more places than we think possible. More people than we could ever imagine woke up with no food to eat this morning. Innumerable hearts are hurting over the people cut-off from them, the trauma inflicted on them by another person. Both of these experiences are true: the goodness of God’s creation and the brokenness that humans, daily, introduce into it. But when we keep these stories together, when we see their power in our lives every day, they offer us hope. Together, their descriptions are not just a sorrowful commentary on human life and what could have been. They

also become descriptions of the hope and possibility God offers for our living as Christ’s disciples.

How do we think about creation and fall all together? How do we understand God’s presence and work in those matters, at the very same time? The idea of *failing forward* points us at least in the right direction. People have been talking about mistakes and failure a lot in recent years. Whether in corporate life or our personal lives, we are invited to study our mistakes instead of covering them up. As writer Greg Phelan says, “We learn something from our mistakes that we can’t learn from our successes, which is precisely why we should talk about them honestly and productively.”<sup>2</sup> This makes a lot of sense when our company didn’t perform as well as expected. Or when we did poorly on an important test. Or didn’t get a job or promotion we were hoping for. Concrete mistakes are ones we can turn over in our minds, figure out what went wrong, and do it differently next time. Mistakes are just part of living. Mistakes are things that we can often fix on our own, with some hard work and the right kind of support. That is important work for us to do and it leads us to grow as people. That kind of growth, though, is what theologians would call *works righteousness*. That’s us accomplishing things on our own; that kind of experience doesn’t require any faith, or really any God at all.

But the notion of *fall* in scripture is bigger than just finite mistakes we make. As Phelan says, “Failures are sometimes more than a mere setback or more than a matter of wrong timing. The experts tell us that putting failure in context is helpful to keep a person from ‘blowing it out of proportion’—but what if the proportion really is that bad? What if putting things in context reveals just how badly we screwed up?”<sup>3</sup> When the failure is bigger than we can fix or understand, when it’s so much more complex than we could ever tease apart, then what does it mean to *fail forward*? It’s these kind of failings that push us toward faith, toward trust in God, toward a sense that we don’t just need a quick fix or to learn something from what happened. What we need is a new beginning that we cannot provide for ourselves.

That’s what the rocks at the foot of the Iron Cross are asking for. Those stones represent things that are so heavy, people are willing to walk hundreds of miles to seek a new way to cope with them. And the act of leaving those sins at the foot of the cross is the act that ties the story of the fall to the story of creation. As Bolz-Weber writes, “[In laying down their stones at that cross, countless fellow humans have reached for God—whether named as such or not, and said, “help.” Help. Unburden me. Forgive me. See me. Intercede for me.” Laying down those stones is a