When I Find Myself in Times of Trouble
Genesis 3:8-15
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Pentecost 3/B

This sermon was preached by Pastor Kurt Jacobson at Trinity Lutheran Church, Eau Claire, WI.

Dear Friends, grace and peace be with you all.

Back during my years of training to be a pastor, I had heard that over 50% of Lutheran churches were in rural areas and three-quarters of first time pastors started there. So I enrolled in Luther Seminary’s course on Rural Ministry - figuring it might help me if I found myself serving such a congregation after graduation. While I came right to Trinity after finishing seminary and never served a rural congregation, some of the learning has stuck with me over the years.

One week of this course included a field experience and I was assigned to two small congregations near Elbow Lake, MN. Pastor Paul Pederson served them both. Paul did a great job immersing me in the culture and color of rural life. We spent time each morning in the local cafes visiting with everyone who came through the door. I attended church meetings in the evenings which were always followed by “lunch” which consisted of sandwiches, green jello, homemade pickles, donuts and cookies.

There were two days in this rural ministry class that are still prominent in my memory - many years later. The first was the day I spent with the local veterinarian, Bob Hagen. Bob was delightful and he too did a great job of immersing me in his work as a large animal vet. As the day started, our first stop was at the Lindloff farm. The Lindloffs were one of only a few dairy farmers in this grain farming county. Bob’s task that morning was to vaccinate the herd and do "pregnancy" check of the cows.

I wasn’t very well prepared in the clothing department for this day of Rural Ministry class. Coming out of the seminary in St. Paul, I had forgotten my coveralls and rubber boats, but Dr. Bob was kind enough to outfit me before I accompanied him into the barnyard. It was a bright, mild December day, warm enough so nothing was frozen. As we arrived, Bob introduced me to Farmer Lindloff and we were off to work. The cows were ushered out of the barn and into a "cage-like" contraption where they would be secured for the vaccination and "pregnancy" test. My job was to operate the gate of this cage in which the cow was secured while the unpleasantries were done upon each one. As Bob finished the two tasks on each cow and I opened the gate, I marveled over the haste with which the cow departed. I didn’t know cows could move so fast. Suffice it to say the coveralls Bob had put on me were helpful -- and a large hat with wide-brim would have been appreciated.

Then there was the second memorable day of this rural ministry class which took place while I was staying with my first host, James Carlson. James was a bachelor. He had no siblings. He had grown up on the farm, taken care of both parents until their deaths and was the sole operator of a big grain farm. James also loved his Buick which he used for rides into town when he wasn’t in need of his pick-up. During my stay I rode in his Buick numerous times and every time we went somewhere, he took a different country road. Now, on the plains of western MN, all the roads and countryside looked alike to me.

This second memorable day of rural ministry class happened on a Sunday. I was to visit both churches that Pastor Paul served - the Norwegian one in the country and the Swedish one in Elbow Lake metro. The Norwegians had their service first - at 9am. James was Swedish and went to the church in town.
After giving me a cup of coffee (breakfast would come later at the local café) James sent me out onto the country roads with hurried directions to the rural Norwegian church. Now, you’re smiling because you know what happened. I got completely lost. You could have put me in a maze - I was dizzy with a conflicted sense of direction. Driving around with great haste, frantically trying to get my bearings and with a hollow feeling in my stomach, I never made it to the little Norwegian church where I was to assist with the worship service. By about 9:30 I managed to find my way to the Swedish church in town where I hid from everyone, waiting with great embarrassment for Pastor Paul to show up. Luckily, when Paul did arrive, he had humorously played up my absence with the Norwegians and was looking forward to letting the Swedes in on my trouble.

Trouble. We’ve all been in trouble and we’ve all caused it.
*If you're a kid, trouble can be the result of disobeying mom or dad.
*For a teenager, trouble can happen from staying out too late.
*If you're the accountant in your home, trouble can mean a shortfall in the checkbook at bill-paying time.

*For farmers, trouble comes in the form of breakdowns, infestations, frost, and drought.
*For married people, trouble comes when one person in the couple begins to step-out of the marriage.

I think it's safe to say, that no matter who we are, no matter what age we are, or what occupation we're in, or where we live, we all have times in our lives when we get into trouble. Trouble, whether we make it or receive it, has some consequences. Trouble usually means we have to change and adapt to some new element that's come into our lives.

*For the child or teenager, it often means accepting the discipline of parents.
*For the family bill payer, it can mean sitting down with creditors to square away one's finances.
*For the farmer it may mean having to use sprays, losing a crop or worse.
*For the married person it may mean a quick enrollment in marriage counseling.

Trouble disrupts. Trouble interrupts. Trouble challenges us to rethink and change.

The common denominator to all trouble, is that no one of us is immune to it. All of us, sooner or later get into it. At some point in our lives, we all have to deal with trouble. It's a fact of life.

The bible reading from Genesis the third chapter offers us some guidance in dealing with trouble. Specifically, Genesis shows us how God responds when we get into trouble.

In Genesis 3 the man and the woman (later named Adam and Eve) have just eaten from the tree in the middle of the garden. They weren’t supposed to do that. God has given very specific instructions to leave that tree alone - and if they did eat from it, they would immediately die. So after eating, the man and woman are immediately guilty. They know they've done wrong. They’re ashamed and embarrassed. They fear big trouble is headed their way. So they hide.

God, in the meantime the Bible tells us, is out in the garden taking a walk and enjoying the trees in the evening breeze. To make the evening even more pleasant, God looks for that man and woman who had been created to enjoy the garden too. But on this evening, the pair isn't out enjoying the garden. Remember - they've gotten into to trouble, big time, by disobeying God. Of course God knows - so now they're hiding from God who told them not to eat of that tree.

God calls out to them, "Where are you?" Now, aren’t you surprised? I am. All God asks is: "where are you?" Whenever I was in trouble as a kid, and my mom or dad came looking for me they never just said:
"where are you?" But with the man and woman, God simply calls "Where are you?" Notice what God doesn’t say to the little scoundrels who have disobeyed and gotten into trouble. There's no threat, no demands, no anger expressed. Nothing more forthcoming but the simple question: "where are you?" God doesn't step into their trouble and berate, accuse or sentence. "Where are you?" God asked. God fairly gives the ashamed and hiding man and woman a place to start. God helps move them from a position of trouble and helplessness to one of restoration and forgiveness.

What marvelous wisdom this bible passage shares for those times when we get in trouble or when we’re ashamed of our own actions and withdraw from God. God doesn’t get angry and vengeful. We see here that God doesn’t have anger issues or need a lesson in anger management!

Instead, after asking the trouble-making man and woman “Where are you?” God listens! The man replies to God: ‘I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.’ So God asks another question: ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?’ The man replied and again shows his troublesome ways, ‘The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.’ Then again God asks a question and listen. To the woman God asks, ‘What is this that you have done?’ The woman said, ‘The serpent tricked me, and I ate.’

Then, God deals with the serpent and turns attention back to the man and woman in a way that teaches them about their disobedience. There are some consequences. But God doesn’t disown them. God doesn’t lash out or read them the riot act. Instead, God lays down some new ways of dealing with the man and woman. Yet even in the consequences, God continues to provide for them.

The nature of God when dealing with people and the trouble we make is full of God’s trademark mercy and patience. I hope you see there’s never any reason to hide from God or think God is angry with you. Likewise, in the course of our living, we can take this same approach and make it our mission of being God-like in the ways we respond to the troubles others make, too. Amen.