

1st Sunday Lent Year "A"

"You certainly will not die!"

March 4-5, 2017 (5:15 pm, 8:00 am, 10:00 a.m.)

Readings: Genesis 2: 7-9; 3:1-7; Romans 5: 12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

The readings for the first Sunday of Lent, in all three of the cycles (Matthew this year, but also Mark and Luke) focus on the account of Jesus' temptation by the devil. It is the classic biblical scene of Good vs. Evil outside of the Garden of Eden. And yet, the Garden of Eden has its own powerful lessons for our consideration.

One aspect of the account is sometimes overlooked, namely the interaction between Eve and the serpent. Recall, the serpent promised Eve that she would never die. At the time, these were offered as words of comfort and reassurance, and they must have been very powerful. Today, I am not quite as convinced that people think of the *eternal consequences* of their actions, but in the Garden the focus was on her earthly existence. The major difference is only clear to us looking backward. Our first parents were created to be in a perpetual state of grace and in God's presence.

Genesis Chapter 3, the source of our first reading, is so instructive precisely because it so accurately describes the etiology of sin; it is incisive as a doctor's diagnosis. It includes the observation that *man's innate error* is in wanting to save himself. "We can only be saved—that is, be free and true— when we stop wanting to be God..." Many years before he was Pope, Cardinal Ratzinger reflected on this passage from Genesis:

"We can only be saved when he from whom we have cut ourselves off takes the initiative with us and stretches out his hand to us. Only being loved is being saved and only God's love can purify damaged human love and radically reestablish the network of relationships that have suffered from alienation."¹

¹Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *In the Beginning*, p. 91-92

The season of Lent is so vitally important because it forces to do that which on a natural level at least, makes us recoil. It forces us to take a good look at ourselves and face the effects of original sin head on, and to cease making any more excuses.

Original Sin strikes the modern person as being utterly unfair. Why should we be left to pick up the pieces for others? And yet, if we cannot recognize ourselves in the account of the Garden, how honest are we being with ourselves? When a young adult first breaks free from home and lives on his or her own, a surge of power often comes over them, the proverbial “first taste of freedom.” Too often, they struggle to handle this freedom, to appropriate it, to manage its costs as well as its benefits. Adults know that this process is normal, and yet, we worry, we pray and we hope against hope that they will be strong enough to handle freedom’s demands.

Does this represent a lack of trust from one’s parents, from one’s teachers or pastors? Not at all. Rather, it is a recognition of the powerful effects of Original Sin that work so subtlety in our lives. The great writer C. S. Lewis noted that the devil only needs to have us see that a serious faith life can wait...there is no rush. There will be time for this later- not just now. Or recall the infamous words of Augustine, his prayer as a young man: “Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.” He went on to add: “I was afraid that you might hear me too soon and cure me too soon from the disease of a lust which I preferred to be satisfied rather than extinguished.”²

While Genesis 3 may use some figurative language, it clearly affirms a primeval event, something that took place at the beginning of the history of man. The whole of human history is marked by the original fault committed by our first parents.

² cf. Augustine, *Confessions* 8.7.17. “*da mihi castitatem et continentiam, sed noli modo.*”

If I were forced to name one dogma for which its clarity has grown with each passing year, I would choose Original Sin, much more so than the Trinity, the Holy Eucharist or the Marian dogmas. The reality of Original Sin only grows as we develop, as we gain lived experience. It no longer seems “unfair,” as the more mature Christian moves beyond childish complaints, and sees the human condition for what it is.

We are loved, we are enveloped in God’s Grace; we are not depraved individuals. Our faith affirms: “The power of Satan is, nonetheless, not infinite. He is only a creature, powerful from the fact that he is pure spirit, but still a creature. He cannot prevent the building up of God's reign.”³ Our first parents certainly failed in this first test with freedom in the Garden. They tasted freedom, falsely seeing it as opposed to a right relationship with God.

As we embark upon our annual spiritual retreat, let our thoughts and efforts be directed towards asking God for the strength to attack our sins at their root, to realize that we can indeed live without these vices in the here and now, and in so doing we discover our true freedom as sons and daughters of God; indeed we discover our true selves.

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph # 395