

Today is the First Sunday in Lent we begin our journey with the affirmation and declaration that GOD's grace is greater than our sin! This morning's readings begin with human creativity, tilling and cultivating the garden and naming the animals. Adam and Eve live an idyllic and peaceful existence—there is no dissonance between instinct and action—they do what they are told without objection or second thoughts—they are naked and unashamed!

Hearing the Word

Genesis 2:15-17; Genesis 3:1-7 (The Voice)

¹⁵ The Eternal God placed the *newly made* man in the Garden of Eden in order to work the ground and care for it. ¹⁶ He made certain demands of the man *regarding life in the garden*.

God: Eat freely from any *and all* trees in the garden; ¹⁷ I only require that you abstain from eating the fruit of *one tree*—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. *Beware:* the day you eat the fruit of this tree, you will certainly die.

Genesis provides an image of the ideal marriage: One man—one woman; in a one-flesh relationship; for life! These four elements constitute the ideal, as Jesus reminds His followers (Matthew 19:4–5). Anything less, anything more, or anything other misses the ideal. In marriage two individuals, who once lived as “me,” come together as “we” in one flesh and one life. No earthly bond can match the intimacy of this divinely sanctioned union.

3 ¹Of all the wild creatures the Eternal God had created, the serpent was the craftiest.

Serpent (*to the woman*): Is it true that God has forbidden you to eat *fruits* from the trees of the garden?

Eve: ² *No, serpent. God said we are free to eat the fruit from the trees in the garden.* ³ *We are granted access to any variety and all amounts of fruit with one exception: the fruit from the tree found in the center of the garden. God instructed us not to eat or touch the fruit of that tree or we would die.*

Serpent: ⁴ *Die? No, you'll not die. God is playing games with you.* ⁵ *The truth is that God knows the day you eat the fruit from that tree you will awaken something powerful in you and become like Him: possessing knowledge of both good and evil.*

⁶ *The woman approached the tree, eyed its fruit, and coveted its mouth-watering, wisdom-granting beauty. She plucked a fruit from the tree and ate. She then offered the fruit to her husband who was close by, and he ate as well.* ⁷ *Suddenly their eyes were opened to a reality previously unknown. For the first time, they sensed their vulnerability and rushed to hide their naked bodies, stitching fig leaves into crude loincloths.*

Question: Where does evil come from?

As Christians we think that the answer must be somewhere in the Bible—but it's not there. In Genesis 3 we are introduced to a serpent—who is clearly identified as one of GOD's creatures. GOD

made the serpent—and yet this serpent turned out crafty and manipulated by an evil force—whose origin is, again, simply not explained!

This serpent lures and entices Eve and then Adam away from GOD. The serpent is not called Satan or the devil or even the tempter; yet through the serpent's shrewd and clever words—GOD's desires for this Creation become sullied and desecrated in ways from which we have not yet recovered in 2014!

We are called to live in GOD's world and on GOD's terms. If you trust that GOD has our best interests at heart—then you can fit yourself into GOD's Creation without feeling as if the zip just went out of everything.

Trust:

- ✓ Can we trust that if GOD says "Don't," it's because GOD doesn't *want* to see us get hurt?
- ✓ Can we trust that if GOD says, "Go ahead," it's because GOD *wants* us to enjoy our lives?
- ✓ Or—will we choose instead distrust and suspicion—leading us to choose distrust and suspicion?

Genesis 3 lays out all of this for us!

Eve ate the fruit! So did Adam! Their eyes were open and they gained new knowledge and this new knowledge promptly drove them to the bushes!

- ✓ Suddenly life didn't feel so innocent anymore!
- ✓ They had done something behind GOD's back!

- ✓ So when they heard GOD snapping twigs under GOD's divine feet on his daily stroll and walk in the garden—suddenly Adam and Eve did—what at one time or another we've all done (but it was a first for Adam and Eve): they blushed, went red, flushed, felt embarrassed, and ashamed!
- ✓ And the blushing hasn't stopped since—even for us in 2014!

Genesis 3 reminds us of how things go when suspicion displaces trust, when self-reliance and an independent spirit trumps our belief that there is a GOD who has our best interest at heart!

Matthew 4:1-11 (The VOICE Bible)

4 The Spirit then led Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the devil. ² Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights. After this fast, he was, *as you can imagine*, hungry. ³ *But he was also curiously stronger*, when the tempter came to Jesus.

Devil: If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.

Jesus (*quoting Deuteronomy*): ⁴ It is written, "Man does not live by bread alone. Rather, he lives on every word that comes from the mouth of the Eternal One."

The point, of course, is not that Jesus couldn't have turned these stones to bread. A little later in the story Jesus can make food appear when he needs to. But Jesus doesn't work miracles out of the blue, for no reason, for show or proof or spectacle. Jesus works them in intimate,

close places; and works them to meet people's needs and to show them the way to the Kingdom.

⁵ Then the devil took Jesus to the holy city, *Jerusalem*, and he had Jesus stand at the very highest point in the holy temple.

Devil: ⁶ If You are the Son of God, jump! *And then we will see if you fulfill* the Scripture that says,

He will command His heavenly messengers concerning you, and the messengers will buoy you in their hands so that you will not *crash, or fall, or even graze your foot on a stone.*

Jesus: ⁷ That is not the only thing Scripture says. It also says, "Do not put the Eternal One, your God, to the test."

⁸ And still the devil *subjected Jesus to a third test.* He took Jesus to the top of a very high mountain, and he showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world in all their *splendor and glory, their power and pomp.*

Devil: ⁹ If you bow down and worship me, I will give you all these kingdoms.

Jesus: ¹⁰ Get away from me, Satan. *I will not serve you. I will instead follow* Scripture, which tells us to "worship the Eternal One, your God, and serve only him."

¹¹ Then the devil left Jesus. And heavenly messengers came and ministered to him.

GOD NEVER ACTIVELY LEADS US TO SIN—AND PROBABLY DOES NOT ACTIVELY LEAD US TO

TEMPTATION AS WELL! (though this need not rule out GOD's ability to test our faith!).

- ✓ GOD is not the author of sin and is, therefore, not eager to trip us up where sin is concerned.
- ✓ Our compassionate GOD does not typically toss and throw us into a locked closet with the devil and then waits to see how we do.
- ✓ When we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "*lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil,*" we do so knowing up front that GOD is in the business of delivering us from evil and so is not luring and enticing us to sin!

So in Matthew 4:1—the Spirit of GOD leads Jesus into the wilderness—to be tempted by the devil. Jesus was led into temptation—by the Holy Spirit!

No, GOD does not lead **us** into temptation. Instead—GOD delivers us from evil! One of the main reasons we can be sure of this is precisely on our behalf—Jesus *was* led into temptation so as to ensure that we would never face this ourselves!

So in Matthew 4 Jesus is now enduring a wilderness period of trial and temptation—but in every instance where Israel failed—Jesus succeeds!

- ✓ Jesus is the New Israel!
- ✓ Notice that each time Jesus parries and sidesteps one of the devil's blows with a Scripture quotation—the verses comes from Deuteronomy—which was the charter for Israel's saved life in the Promised Land!

- ✓ If “Deuteronomy” is—literally ***deuteros nomos***—or “*the law a second time,*” then Jesus is Israel in the wilderness a second time—but this time Jesus succeeds where Israel blew it!

Yet—everyday today—we too are tempted!

- ✓ We’re tempted by quick fixes; by the instant gratifications.
- ✓ We’re tempted to do silly and stupid things by which to test if GOD’s word is true.
- ✓ We’re tempted to take shortcuts, engage in cut-throat tactics, telling little (or big) lies, working ourselves half-to-death—bowing our knees to the false gods of money, success, power, and prestige.

Jesus’ temptations present to us a microcosm of what we all face. The temptations also suggest how we can remain faithful to GOD.

FOR ALL OF US THIS MORNING—GOD’S GRACE ALWAYS HAS THE LAST WORD (*especially in Lent!*).

Sometimes for us—living lives of grace means living lives of suffering and self-denial as well!

Jesus was right to ***feast on GOD’s Word*** instead of the quick and easy words by which he could have turned stones into bread. Jesus was right not to put GOD to the test and just trust that GOD’s care for him was powerful as it claimed to be. But at the end of Temptation #2—Jesus’ faith remained vulnerable to doubt—GOD has not put in an appearance.

Jesus was right to refuse grabbing for the kingdoms of this world by worshiping that which must not be worshiped. But at the end of Temptation #3—Jesus remained on a path that would indeed lead him to become the Lord of this world's kingdoms but that path would lead straight to a place called **Golgotha** ("skull"—the place Jesus was crucified on the cross)!

This Season of Lent is a time for us to stick close to our Savior Jesus who has already promised us grace and will stick close to us—even when we're hungry, uncertain, and walking a desert path that leads to a cross.

Jesus had to go to the desert, to the wilderness, to that encapsulation (*"encapsulation means that the internal representation of an object is generally hidden from view outside of the object's definition"*) of the chaos of evil that the Bible describes. In the wilderness GOD built GOD's highway to salvation because where else BUT the wilderness did the road to life need to begin!

Doing the Word

So—on this First Sunday of Lent, what is the Word of God for us?

1. ONE: GOD'S G-R-A-C-E ALWAYS HAS THE LAST WORDS!

We need to develop wisdom to know that the moral life before GOD is often an exercise in a careful sorting through of multiple layers of complexity! The only way for us to do that sorting out properly is to believe that GOD through the Spirit is available to help us because

GOD want us to flourish, to enjoy life, and so avoid hurts of all kinds!

Someone asked a Jewish rabbi why GOD had to call out "Adam, where are you?" "Didn't GOD know where Adam was?" this person asked the rabbi. "Oh yes, GOD knew," the rabbi replied, "it was Adam who didn't know where he was."

NOR DO MANY OF US MOST OF THE TIME!

2. TWO: WE ARE TO FEAST ON GOD'S WORD!

- ✓ Note that Jesus was a man of Scripture! Jesus in our Matthew gospel always began with the words—"It is written!"
- ✓ The answer to every temptation we face and experience is the recitation of the texts that we also already INCARNATE in the ordinary run of our lives—texts that are second nature to us as so clearly were to Jesus!
- ✓ GOD's words/WORD spell LIFE!

3. THE WILDERNESS IS NOT A BAD PLACE TO BE FOR US CHRISTIANS!

- ✓ TFCCCH has been in wilderness experiences in its 135 years!
- ✓ Being in the wilderness is not a bad thing.
- ✓ We are in a wilderness right now and have been for several years.

Sent in the Word

In this Season of Lent we are right to follow Jesus to the cross and take sorrowful note of all his

sufferings for us—but let us never forget that a big piece of those sufferings continued on a daily basis as the devil aimed all his evil artillery right at Jesus' heart – 24/7!

Our Lenten 2014 journey of 40 days (35 now) provides us with a great opportunity for spiritual discernment. We are invited to consider our relationship with GOD and each other. Lent helps us to understand confession as a positive practice—nurturing our spirits and ever our physical well-being. Lent calls us to consider our vocation and calling and the temptations inherent in our deepest gifts and passions!