

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7
Psalm 32:1-8
Romans 5:12-19
Matthew 4:1-11

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First Sunday of Lent

“But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’”

Each one of us in our lives has to ponder the question of what we are here for. What is our vocation? What does God call us to? Or, to paraphrase Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman, what is that particular work and ministry that God has entrusted to you and to no one else?

It was not until a few years ago that I ever thought to look in the Book of Genesis for an answer to that question. But one summer I read the Genesis passage that was our first reading today and I was really captivated by the description of the vocation of the first humans:

“The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden, to till it and keep it.”

The first humans were called to be gardeners. They were called to care for the trees and the plants in the Garden of Eden. The animals, too, the creation story says, were created as potential helpers and companions of humans, and we gave them their names and were told to care for them.

I love this vision of paradise – of the world as a garden. It is a vision of peace and our original blessedness, of the overflowing love of God that fashioned us from the dust with loving care.

This, too, is the story of each of our lives – that we are formed and shaped with care and love in our mothers’ wombs, and that God places callings in each of us, as we are made, for us to discover the way in which we, too, might in our own way serve and care for the whole creation, or some particular part of it.

The story of creation tells each of our stories. And the story that follows creation – the story of the Fall – tells each of our particular stories as well. That there is a first time we knowingly do wrong, go against the great designs God has for us. And just as the story of the Fall in Genesis happens in chapter 3, when chapter 2 had just finished the creation story, so our own first sins happen quite soon. We probably don’t remember them, but we would recognize the pattern.

We are told, probably by our parents, that some behavior is wrong. We think about it, feel tempted to do it though we shouldn’t, and then we do. Maybe we take something we shouldn’t, put ourselves or someone else in danger, hurt someone, or simply act in selfishness, as if we were the only person who mattered.

And then, the consequences come. Someone is hurt, or endangered, or we do something bad for ourselves, or we get in trouble, and we learn that sick feeling that we are all so familiar with now – guilt, or remorse. The sickening realization that we really shouldn’t have done whatever we did – that we have done wrong. We have sinned.

Just as with Adam and Eve in the garden, the knowledge of right and wrong – the knowledge of good and evil – comes with the sin. As we encounter the consequences we begin to understand *why* we shouldn’t have done it. We start to see and feel the wrongness.

We see that same self-awareness dawn on Adam and Eve as they suddenly realize for the first time they are naked. They feel exposed and unable to hide what they have done – suddenly feeling vulnerable and aware of their imperfection. Suddenly feeling the pain of guilt – that sense organ that, unpleasant as it can be, helps us to recognize right and wrong.

And this falling happens over and over again in our lives. We encounter some temptation. We (hopefully) resist the temptation – and sometimes succeed! But we often give in to the temptation, and do some harm to ourselves or to others.

When I speak of temptation, I’m not really talking here about chocolate – although I suspect that some of you may have given up that or some related thing for Lent, and are going to be tempted by it during the next few weeks. But that kind of temptation is really sort of a parable for the big temptations. Eating chocolate is not in itself a sin! (Although breaking a promise not to eat chocolate is.)

But there are plenty of things we know are wrong and harmful – evil, even – that we want to do. Because we are selfish, or angry at another person and want to hurt them, or we’re too proud to have compassion on someone else’s pain.

Giving in to temptation often ends up being painful to us if our eyes are open enough to see the harm we’ve done. Resisting temptation is painful, too, and hard. It’s not without reason that it is often described

in terms of spiritual warfare. Those of us who have struggled with serious anger, or addictions, or pride, or greed, or selfishness know how it can feel like a battle for control over yourself and your own evil impulses.

And sometimes some of us may feel like this is an area where it is hard to find comfort from God, because of His perfect holiness and sinlessness. Because Jesus always succeeded in resisting temptation, as we see an example of in today's Gospel reading.

But giving into temptation is really the easy part. It may not feel good after the fact, but the giving in is the end of a struggle. A sort of rest. Jesus knows about that struggle with temptation and He sympathizes, because He was always in it – never giving in. “He was tempted in every way as we are.”

Matthew says Jesus was “famished” when the devil came to tempt Him to eat before His fast was over. And He was frequently frustrated by the unbelief of others, and so the devil's suggestion of throwing Himself off the temple to provoke a dramatic miracle with the appearance of angels rescuing Him may have really worked at Him, tempting Him with a way that might make people believe.

But in the 3rd temptation, the devil utterly gives himself away when he asks Jesus to worship him. If you look closely at the story, you'll see that it is only after Satan asks for worship that Jesus identifies him by name, saying, “Away with you, Satan.” That is what ultimately characterizes and identifies a sin – when it draws us away from God and tempts us to give our primary love or dedication or worship to anything else – person, or thing, or spiritual power.

So it is valuable for us, in this season of self-examination and penitence, to look at where we have sinned, how we ourselves are most sorely tempted. What people or things or impulses we are placing above God in our devotion.

This is not so that we can feel more guilt. Guilt is just a *tool* for noticing sin. It's not something to wallow in and it's not a goal of Lent or of penitence in general. The goal is love. Connection and friendship with God, and with our neighbour. Love is the clearest glimpse of paradise that we can have in the midst of a difficult and sinful world.

And the love of God has in fact been shown, clearer than in any other way, in God's response to our fall.

The serpent said, “When you eat of [the tree] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.”

Perhaps this is what most tempted Eve – a desire to be like God, whether out of pride or out of a misguided kind of love that wanted to resemble her Creator but confusedly thought that could come out of outright disobedience.

And perhaps the serpent thought he was right. Or perhaps he was deliberately lying. But as I looked at the serpent's words as I contemplated this Scripture passage this week, I realized that his words ended up kind of coming true, though in the opposite way from what he had expressed.

He said, “Your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.”

Eve and Adam sinned thinking that they would become like God. But instead, because of sin, *God chose to become like us*. He has become human.

Because we find it impossible to resist temptation all the time, God came as Jesus Christ to be a teacher and an example of how to resist temptation.

Because we are now weighed down by a burden of sin and guilt that we don't know how to let go of, God came, experienced the pain of sin through the unjust punishment He received at the hands of the Roman Empire, and then took that weight of sin upon Himself upon the cross, and then carried it away with Him – lifted it up and bore it away when He returned to the Father.

And because we are tempted to despair in our sinfulness, to give up trying, or be buried by guilt, Jesus returned to life, in love, without resentment for what He had suffered. He returned saying “Peace.” He returned to assure us that there is a way out of our darkness. To assure us that we do not have to hold on to the burden of guilt because He forgives us.

And we do not have to hold on to the fear of sin or death, because Jesus is stronger and He has burst through both with a stronger power - the power of Love. A power that God shares with us – a power that does, in fact, make us like Him.

Amen.