

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT (A)

Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

March 13, 2011

The Rev. Peter C. Jacobson, STS

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

Wichita, Kansas

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We come once more to this great spiritual season of Lent — a time of preparation, self-examination and introspection. A time to be re-grounded in the basics of the faith. A time to be re-grounded in the basics of our relationship with God.

So, once again on this first Sunday in Lent, the Church brings us back to the desert with Jesus, *and* also brings us back to the garden in the book of Genesis.

Our Reading from Genesis tells some of the most elemental truths that must be accepted, and wrestled with, as people of God. God planted a *garden* in Eden, and placed the first people there. What does God want for us? *Life!* And life to the full! That's what He wants — that's why it's a garden! We must ever remember that. In this beautiful story from Genesis, God's desire for us is expressed through this image of the garden — a place of *delight*, of *color*, of *vitality*. A place where human abilities are energetically engaged.

The church fathers read Adam and Eve at play in the garden of Eden, as humanity at its best — the great permission that God gives. Now God does give a prohibition, but we mustn't overlook the tremendous permission he gives. Go eat of *all* the fruit of *all* the trees of the garden. Again, the church fathers understood this to be an invitation to science, politics, art, culture, conversation, friendship — all the things that make life rich, all those ways that our various abilities are awakened and engaged. That's what God wants for us in this garden of delight!

But, there is also a prohibition. From the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden — the tree of the knowledge of good and evil — from *that* tree God said, "*you shall not eat of it...lest you die.*"

What does this symbolic tree mean? And why is it placed at the very center of the garden?

Well, if the garden means full human flourishing, if it means the engagement of our abilities and gifts, what stands as the anchor and at the heart of that process? A basic sense of good and evil. You want to have a full, rich, life — what must you know? You must know keenly the difference between good and evil. You want to be a success in business — not just a commercial success, but a success in God's eyes — you've got to know the difference between right and wrong. You want to be a good friend, a good husband or wife, a good son or daughter, a good neighbor. What must you know? The difference between good and evil.

For people to truly flourish — to have life to the full — there must be a clear sense of the objective difference between right and wrong, good and evil. Without that, the play of the garden becomes something terrible and destructive.

So, whose prerogative is good and evil? *Not ours!* We are at play in the field of the Lord — good! We are engaging our God-given abilities — terrific! *But* we do not ourselves determine the difference between right and wrong. Rather, that belongs *uniquely* to God. So, if God and his criteria, grounded in his own mind, remain at the center of your life, then it becomes a garden — a place of delight.

But what happens as the story unfolds? Adam and Eve — seduced by the serpent — see the fruit of this tree as something delightful, something alluring. And so they grasp it. They seize it for themselves. What have they done? They have said, *we* have now become the criterion — the arbiter — of good and evil. *We* will decide what's right and wrong. *We* will determine the difference between good and evil.

And that dear friends, is the heart of sin. All of our agony and struggle in the spiritual sense, flow from this fundamental mis-step.

And how does the serpent construe God as he seduces Adam and Eve? He says, “*Look, I know why God is prohibiting this tree. It's because if you eat of it, you will be like him — knowing good and evil. He's jealous of you!*” That lie from the serpent has been believed up and down the ages, to the present day. It's the lie that God is a rival to us. That God's glory is bought at the expense of our agony. That only when we are put down is God elevated. That is a great lie, and it flows from the devil, whom Jesus calls the “*father of lies*” (Jn 8:44).

In contrast, when we surrender to the objectivity of God's criterion of good and evil, then we find truth and life! And we're not subjugated by the surrender to being creatures instead of the Creator. We're not belittled by it. Rather, we are *elevated* by it.

Now, what was the result of the eating from the forbidden tree? It's not in today's Reading, but at the end of the third chapter of Genesis, Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden. But it's not that God fell into a snit, or became punitive. It's more a matter of a kind of spiritual cause and effect — not unlike with the laws of physics. If you do this, that will happen. If you step off a building, you will fall to the earth. It's also true in a spiritual sense. If you grasp at that the knowledge of good and evil, if you make *your own will* the arbiter of right and wrong, you — ipso facto — leave the garden. Not because God is being difficult. It's just a spiritual reality. When you set yourself up as God, the garden becomes a place of lifelessness and aridity — a desert rather than a garden.

That's the story of Adam and Eve. And it is also *our* story. It's the human story to the present day. The dynamics of the garden are going on all the time, right now. God holding out to us life, and life to the full. But we stubbornly seize at the knowledge of good and evil — we attempt to make ourselves the judge of right and wrong, and we turn the garden into a desert.

But the story doesn't end there. The story culminates in the journey of the

Son of God into that desert.

When Jesus begins his public ministry, where does he go? Into the desert. ***He goes into our sin.*** He goes to accompany us in this place to which we've wandered. And there he confronts the devil. In our First Reading we have the devil tempting Adam and Eve. And in the Gospel, we have the devil tempting Jesus. And Jesus standing in the place of our sin.

Satan holds out to Jesus three classic temptations — three ways in the desert. When we've rejected God as the ground of good and evil, we tend to wander in three typical ways.

First, we make physical pleasure the center of our concerns. We make eating, drinking, sex, and entertainment our dominant preoccupations. What is this, but a source of great mischief! For only God can legitimately fill the central position. That's why Jesus now confronts this temptation. The devil says, "*Turn the stones into bread. I know how hungry you are. Make physical satisfaction and pleasure the center of your life.*" On our behalf, in the desert, Jesus resists.

Second, once we've wandered into that arid place, we can make honor our central preoccupation — no longer God. But our own reputation, being seen by everybody, admired, being thought highly of — well, Jesus confronts this too. The devil takes him to the pinnacle of the Temple, the high point of the most important building, of the most important city. Everyone can see him; he's at the top of society. That's where people who seek honor want to be. But Jesus resists this temptation too. He knows that the will of God must be central in life.

Finally, those of us who've wandered into the desert, who've turned away from making God the center of our lives, we tend to be tempted by power. It could be political power, like a dictator or tyrant. But for most of us, it's much more mundane — it's the temptation to assume power in our places of work, or in our families or friendships. Power is a deeply alluring thing. And Jesus confronts this temptation too. The devil takes him to the top of a high mountain, and in one glance shows him all the kingdoms of the world. "*All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.*" But again, Jesus resists it, ***for us.*** "*Begone Satan!*" he says. "*You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.*"

Brothers and sisters, as Lent begins, here's a question to ask, "What are you seeking? What are you making the center of your life? Is God clearly at the center?" If not, something else is tempting you — pleasure, honor, power.

Where are you in the desert? Cling to Jesus, who on your behalf, resists, and turns the desert back into a garden.

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

