

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

So, Adam and Eve come of age. No longer the naïve, innocent, childlike beings they had been in the Garden of Eden, they have come of age. Their curiosity got the better of them. Their ability to make choices, including bad choices, got the better of them. They have changed. At least their perception has changed; I mean, they were as naked *before* eating the forbidden fruit as afterwards, but having tasted the knowledge of reality, they now feel guilty and ashamed about it. Their innocent understanding about themselves and their nature has changed. And no matter how many fig leaves they sew together, nothing will ever be the same. Ignorance was bliss, but now knowledge, which is supposed to set us free, has made them miserable. They leave the Garden to travel down that long and rocky road of self-awareness, self-doubt, self-loathing, self-actualization, self-consciousness, self-analysis, self-pride, self-gratification, self-esteem, and all around selfishness in general. And, darn them, they have taken us with them!

Blame it on the serpent, if you must. Blame it on the devil, for it certainly seems as if some other-worldly, sinister, clever mind must be at work here to thwart the intentions of God Almighty, God the creator, who created all things good and even *very* good. Surely, something must be out there with an evil obsession to corrupt the good life, with a wicked desire to destruct what God has constructed. Some dark, delusional, jealous character who craves power and control, and who knows that we are ripe for the picking, weak and innocent as we are. Yeah, divert the blame to someone else, to some other personality if you want. Or blame the faithless secular world, with all of its tasty temptations, if that's where your paranoia drives you. Blame the foolishness of Adam and Eve, or any of our other historical forbearers. I mean, what were they *thinking*?! One minute they were happily tilling the Garden, probably whistling as they worked, and the next, they were hiding from God, ashamed and crestfallen. Is that when Lent began?! One minute we were happily eating pancakes and bacon, and the next some pious clergy person was smearing our face with ashes!

You know that there is more to this story in the third chapter of Genesis, right? After their disobedience and their coming-of-age, Adam and Eve hide in the bushes when they sense God's presence. As God strolls through the Garden in the cool of the evening and calls out to them "Where are you?" I wonder if God wanted to know more than just their geographic coordinates. I don't think God was just playing 'tag' with them. God might just be asking more. God might be asking 'where are you spiritually?' 'Where can I find your true selves?' 'Have you changed?' 'How will I know you, how will I recognize you?' 'Where are you, really?' I would submit to you that this is the question God is always asking of us, maybe the most important question, maybe the question we should seek to answer especially during this season of Lent. Where are you spiritually? Now that you have tasted some sweet temptations, now that you have gained such knowledge, now that you have come-of-age, where are you, really? God wants to know. God is looking for you.

Just a few chapters later in the Book of Genesis, we are told that God is so disappointed in the way his creation has played-out that he decides to wipe the slate clean with a great flood and start over. But in a moment of nostalgic emotion, or maybe creator's remorse, he decides to spare some of his best work and chooses Noah and his family, along with the best animals and seeds, for a second try. While it rains for 40 days and 40 nights, and for months afterwards before the flood subsides, the frightened family is tossed about by squall and storm, having no clue what might await them at any moment. And when the waters finally *do* abate, and they disembark from their salvic vessel, wouldn't you know it?! They brought their sinfulness along in their spiritual suitcases! Civilization wasn't much improved after all. But God, in a passage from that story which we seldom read, says to himself in his heart "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I destroy every living creature as I have done." That's quite an indictment coming from our own creator! We are always inclined to evil once we have come of age. Is that why we have the season of Lent?

The conventional impression of Lent is that of a formula, where problems are solved by getting down on our knees, confessing our sins, reconciling our equation by subtracting our flaws and adding piety. Multiply the number of times we confess and divide by the number of people we have sinfully harmed, and we who are keeping a holy Lent will reach a perfect solution. Just in time for Easter. That is a popular impression. When we give up chocolate and ask for forgiveness, the whole thing fits tightly together like a good jigsaw puzzle. Those outside the church, who observe us on Ash Wednesday with those smudges on our brows think we're crazy...well, first of all they think we are Roman Catholics who have been ordered by the Pope to do it...they think we are flaunting our supposed piety, and may even think that we are being condescending, pretending that we are somehow better than they are. That we think, in fact, that we can be perfect. When even God has admitted that 'the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth'! Is that what Lent is like?

But, dear friends, this conventional picture of Lent is, I think, incomplete. That picture of the puzzle is missing a piece, and I think our Gospel lesson today can help us find that piece and figure out where it fits. How is it that Jesus, after his baptism, goes to the adjacent wilderness of deprivation and danger? He is led, we hear, by the Spirit. We hear of others, too, by the way, in scripture who are led or transported by the Spirit for various purposes of God. But Jesus is led by the Spirit to a place of reflection, with no distractions or comforts, with no one for company during the 40 days and 40 nights except the Spirit of God. Now why would the Spirit do that? How can this time be of any benefit to Jesus? Well, what gifts do we associate with the person of the Spirit? What does the Spirit impart to creation? The breath of life, invigoration, imagination, inspiration, and above all else, Wisdom. Wisdom is the missing piece of the puzzle. We can swallow all the liturgical solutions recommended to us, and with each gulp think we are cleansing our souls of those pesky toxins which corrupt the world, but if we are not seeking Wisdom, there will be little lasting effect.

Jesus is acquiring Wisdom in that barren place, and in our barren season of Lent, we too should take the opportunity to be led by the Spirit on that pilgrimage toward deeper and broader wisdom. In our coming-of-age, like Adam and Eve, we gain knowledge, we add to our information, we learn about our place in the world and our possibilities and our limitations, but without wisdom it is barren, and even dangerous. After 40 days of growth, Jesus can look the devil in the eye and say "no!", even though he is famished, even though he is vulnerable, even though he might have had great selfish plans of his own, he is wise enough to refuse temptation. Imagine if you were that famished; would you have the inclination to say 'no' to turning stones into bread? If you were shown all the kingdoms of the planet and told you could control them all, making them all do what you desired, would you be inclined to refuse?

But this Gospel story is not about us, it is about Jesus. Jesus, who has spent the last 30 years of his life as an obscure nobody in a provincial village, but to whom it has now, at his baptism, been revealed that he is the Messiah, the beloved Son of God, the Christ. This is way too much information, a coming-of-age story which is astounding! What new thoughts must be swirling in his heart and mind? What new routes must he be re-calculating? And meanwhile, God is clearly asking "Where are you?" And God's Spirit leads him away for prayer and fasting and the acquisition of Wisdom. And this story is about the Christ, the one anointed by God to manifest God's grace, God's unconditional love, to be a blessing among us frail human beings. The Spirit manifests God's wisdom; the Christ manifests God's love. This story is not about us, but it is for us. It speaks of the reliability of the Christ, the trustworthiness of God's love, which cannot be tempted to forsake us, cannot be corrupted by evil, but which will abide with us forever.

So, I encourage you to think of this season of Lent as a pilgrimage toward Wisdom, not impossible perfection, but that you *do* recognize the perfected love of God, namely Jesus, escorting us on that journey, reviving us when we falter and lifting us when we stumble for the sake of God's great dream. And I encourage you, as you make that pilgrimage, to answer truthfully when you hear God ask "Where are you now?" As the delighted angels waited on Jesus when his forty days were over, he now faithfully and joyfully waits upon us in all our trials. Amen