

## Liking Lent

I like Lent. It has taken me many years to be able to say that. For much of my life I thought of Lent as a dreary time, full of hymns in a minor key, sad faces missing coffee or chocolate or whatever was fun in life, and an excessive focus on what miserable sinners we are. I don't know what has come over me. I even like the Great Litany these days – not enough to do it every week, mind you, but enough to look forward to its solemnity and its exhaustive list of everything we could possibly want to pray for. I liked it even more when I found out that the Great Litany was the first part of the old Latin liturgy to be translated into English. It connects us directly with our church roots in England, just like the Rite I language that dates back to Shakespeare's time.

What really sold me on Lent was the realization that it provides an annual opportunity to get back to the basics. It's like inheriting an old house that is still full of stuff, taking the time to throw out what is no longer useful and keeping what is good, looking under the stained linoleum in the kitchen and finding a beautiful hardwood floor. In the same way, during Lent we give up what is cluttering our lives, add in daily reflections on the word of God, and forty days later rediscover the beauty of the resurrection. We focus on emptying ourselves so that in a few weeks we can be filled with joy.

This year on Sundays during Lent we will hear why all of this is necessary. We'll go over the whole scope of our relationship with God and one another, what is often called salvation history. Today we start at the beginning of the story with the man and the woman and the serpent from the book of Genesis. Before we go on, I have to offer a disclaimer: in my opinion, the author or authors of Genesis did not intend what they wrote to be taken as historic fact in the way that we now understand history. For one thing, there are two creation stories and they differ in their details – as though both were considered important ways of understanding God's relationship with creation and humankind. You may not agree with me, and that is fine – in the Episcopal Church, members can hold a variety of viewpoints and still serve the living Christ.

What we can all agree on, I think, is that this passage from Genesis tells us something very fundamental about ourselves. Sometimes we want to do exactly the opposite of what God asks us to do. We want to put ourselves in place of God. In the book of Genesis, God gave the humans work to do – till and keep the garden of Eden. It was our first vocation! But that wasn't enough. Humans wanted more.

The story of how we sought more is beautifully told. Notice how sly the serpent is. He works through the woman to get to the man. He claims to know the mind of God. He makes it all sound so very desirable. "You will be like God," he says. And the temptation works. The woman gives in, and so does the man. It is all so common, so banal, and so real. We still tempt one another. We still listen to that little inner voice that says, you'll like this, and God won't even notice. We still choose the path that leads away from God. It is part of who we are because of the freedom of choice that God has given us. And that's precisely why we need Jesus.

Paul makes that clear in his letter to the church in Rome. He was a trained orator who was trying to impress people he had never met, so his writing is difficult and his argument is dense. Basically it comes down to this: Adam and Jesus represent two contrasting types of humanity.

Adam represents disobedience, sin (what Paul calls trespass), condemnation, and death. Jesus Christ represents obedience, righteousness, justification, and life. What connects the two is the grace that comes from God – grace that makes sinners like Adam right before God. The free gift of grace is the answer to the misused gift of choice. Through grace we are forgiven when we make wrong choices. Like Adam, we are subject to sin and condemnation, but through the righteousness of Jesus everyone – and I mean every human being, no exceptions – is offered forgiveness and life through Jesus Christ. Of course, we are still free to reject God’s grace.

In today’s Gospel we see just how different Jesus is from Adam. Each Evangelist describes Jesus’ time in the wilderness a little differently. In Matthew’s version, we hear again the voice of temptation, now identified as the devil rather than the serpent, hitting Jesus right where he is the most vulnerable. After fasting for so many days, Jesus is famished. So the voice says, “*If you are the Son of God*” – sowing doubt in Jesus’ mind – do some magic and turn these stones into bread. Jesus turns that temptation aside by quoting Scripture. Undeterred, the voice also quotes Scripture in tempting Jesus to use God’s power. That doesn’t work, either. Finally – and this is the temptation that I believe is closest to us now – Jesus is tempted with power and riches and splendor if only he will worship something other than God. Fortunately for us, this last temptation doesn’t work, either, and the devil gives up. (In Luke’s telling of the story, the devil leaves “until an opportune time.” That *really* sounds true to life.)

So there you have the setup for this year’s Lent. We’ve heard something true about ourselves that we would rather not face: we want to walk away from God. We deceive one another. Our relationship with God and our neighbor is broken. The only hope for us now is this new type of person, Jesus Christ, who somehow is both fully human and fully divine. He is the one who will show us the way to get right with God and one another.

How Jesus does that will become evident as we go through Lent. Each Sunday we will hear another part of God’s history with the people of Israel, reinterpreted by the early Christian church. Each Sunday we will hear of a personal encounter with Jesus as he walked about the earth. Each person will be transformed in some way, yet still have questions about what happened. That, too, mirrors our own experience. We encounter the divine and then struggle to understand what has happened to us. What we can hold onto is hope. If we clear out the clutter and focus on the basics, we have the promise, the unshakeable promise from God, that we will be transformed by Christ and find life again. So walk this Lenten road with joy, traveling through darkness to the light of God. Then you, too, will like Lent.

[Lent 1: Genesis 2:15-17 and 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11.]