

"Overcome By A Tree"  
Genesis 3:1-21

March 1, 2020

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent

A week ago yesterday was the fortieth anniversary of what Sports' Illustrated magazine voted as the greatest sporting event of the twentieth century: the 1980 USA Olympic hockey team defeating the mighty Soviet Union on February 22, 1980. There were many reasons why this was a memorable match, speaking strictly from an athletic perspective. But there were really two things that made it the greatest sporting event in the twenty century.

First of all, it was memorable that the Soviet Union team lost because they were considered to be the best hockey team in the world. In the hockey world, they were known as the "red menace" and for good reason. They had won every Olympic gold medal since 1964. In 1979, they had won a tournament against NHL All-Stars in which they thoroughly embarrassed them. They came into the Olympic tournament in 1980 with a 42 game winning streak that had lasted for several years. For them to lose at all was thought to be an impossibility.

Second of all, it was not simply *that* they lost, but to *whom* they lost. The United States hockey team was mostly college students, kids averaging about 21 years of age. The Soviet team was made up of seasoned professional hockey players. After the Olympics were over, an official from the Soviet Union from explained why the Soviet hockey team and the Soviet nation took the loss so hard. He said, "First, it was a loss to the Americans. Second of all, it was a loss to the Americans on American soil. And third – and most disappointing – it was a loss to a bunch of college kids. What were they, drunk?" The greatest Olympic hockey game of all times had been decided by a bunch of kids – college students – and that had been unacceptable and unbelievable.

As we enter into the season of Lent, we consider an even more cataclysmic battle in the history of the world – the salvation of humanity for all eternity. It reminded me of the match up in the in 1980 Olympic hockey game. In the huge clash of which we read in our Old Testament lesson and in our Gospel lesson, you have, on the one hand Satan, the evil menace, trying to destroy the bond which humanity, the pinnacle of God's creation had with Him so that we might keep him company in hell for all eternity.

On the other hand, you have Jesus Christ the Son of God attempting to rescue us from Satan and gaining eternal life for us. As the battle in Lake Placid forty years ago was determined by something seemingly weak and unimportant – American college students - so the battle for the salvation of the world also depends upon something seemingly weak and unimportant, namely, trees.

The battleground in our Old Testament lesson today does not seem much like a battleground. God had created the world to be perfect and it was perfect. It was morally perfect with perfect peace. Adam and Eve experienced perfect satisfaction and contentment. They lacked nothing and wanted for nothing. They had only one commandment from their loving Creator, "You may surely eat of every tree of the

garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (Genesis 2:17)

It is this tree which Satan uses to overcome humanity. He begins by tempting Eve to doubt God’s Word. “Did God really say you shall not eat the fruit of that tree?” When Eve responds God had indeed forbidden them to eat the fruit of that tree, Satan begins tempting Eve with lies, saying, “You shall not surely die.” And while Eve contemplates that, Satan goes in for the kill by tempting Eve to be dissatisfied by getting her to think that God is holding back something from her and her husband which they really needed. “You shall not surely die,” said Satan. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

There was no “Miracle in Eden” that day in which a mighty foe was defeated by a much weaker one. Eve took the fruit and ate it. She gave some to Adam and he ate it. This was the first sin. And this sin ruined everything, not only for Adam and Eve, but for all of humanity including us. Adam and Eve were immediately expelled from the garden and the presence of God as would all of their descendants. Sin and its consequences would be passed down from generation to generation. Even worse, death entered the world because of sin and now all shall die because of it. And all of this happened for the sake of something different to eat and the failure to keep one commandment about a fruit tree.

Although it is easy to judge and condemn Adam and Eve ourselves, are we any different? We have been created by God and are His creatures. He promises to give us all that we need to support this body and life. Yet, like Adam and Eve, we are often not satisfied with that which God has promised. We want to “be like God” like Eve did and do what we think best instead of what God commands. We have our “trees” like Adam and Eve – things which God forbids us to do – which we go ahead and do if we think it is in our self-interest. As a result, we inherit the sin of Adam and Eve and we inherit the condemnation of Adam and Eve, namely, death.

Jesus enters this world in fulfillment of God’s promise and prophecy, in order to crush Satan’s head. In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus, the second Adam, engages Satan in battle on our behalf. The battleground truly looks like a battleground this time – the Judean desert. Jesus is weak and vulnerable, having gone forty days and forty nights without food.

Like in his temptation of Eve, Satan tempts Jesus to use His divine power to eat and satisfy His physical needs, rather than obeying His Father’s will to serve others. Satan tempts Jesus to test God by jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple to see if God would really save Him. Satan tempts Jesus to give into greed and bow down before him in an effort to gain the things of this world.

These are all ways in which we fail to keep the Law of God. We use our energy to satisfy ourselves, rather than seeking to serve others. We test God with our behavior, rather than trusting in Him. We give into greed and, in our attempt to gain the things of this world, we risk our relationship with God.

Jesus defeated Satan on all counts. As the God who was truly human, Jesus kept the Law of God as all of humanity is required to do, but failed; as Adam and Eve

failed; and as you and I have failed countless times. However, this was not enough. It fulfills the obligation of keeping the law of God, but it does not deal with past violations of God's Law. They cannot simply be overlooked, forgotten, or ignored. They must be atoned for and washed away. What could possibly accomplish that?

It seems that the whole world is in a tizzy about the coronavirus. People are afraid and panicking. There is much debate about how to overcome this disease, which some have claimed will become a great pandemic which will affect everyone in the world. It is become somewhat of a political football in which some claim all the necessary steps are being taken and others claim that more needs to be done. Surely something strong and powerful is needed to do battle against such a serious disease.

The only true pandemic, the only disease which has affected every person in the world is sin. Every single person in this world has it. Every single person shall die from it. Something even stronger than all the efforts to combat the coronavirus must be implemented. What strong and powerful weapon does God choose? Another tree – a cross. What had been a horrible tool of execution to kill the worst criminals was used by God as a marvelous means of salvation to save the worst sinners from death and hell.

The tree of the cross became the means by which God would overcome Satan. The cross of Jesus Christ became an altar upon which He was sacrificed as the full payment for all of our sins which we have done, which we are doing, and which we will do in the future. By His death, Jesus, the second Adam, overcame the One who had overcome the first Adam so many years before. As the writer to the Hebrews says, "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery." (Hebrews 2:14-15)

Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the first tree and died. We eat of the fruit of the second tree – the body and blood of Jesus Christ which was offered upon that tree – and live. We have His forgiveness. We enjoy fellowship with the Father through Him. We are nurtured and strengthened for our Lenten journey and beyond.

And what lies beyond? We know that, too. For there was yet another tree in the garden besides the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. There was the tree of life. Eating from the first tree meant death and hell. Eating from the second tree, the tree of the cross of Jesus, meant forgiveness and reconciliation. Eating from the third tree, meant eternal life. This tree, described in Genesis, is promised to the faithful in the last chapter of the last book of the Bible, Revelation 22 which says, "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates." (Revelation 22:14). Our lives have been washed clean of all sin in the blood of the Lamb. Now we are forgiven, cleansed, and right before God. We are ready to eat of the tree of life – we and Adam and Eve and the prophets and the apostles and loved ones who have died in the faith, – and live forever.

The "Miracle on Ice" shows that baby-faced college students can determine the winner of a great championship against an unbeatable opponent and bring gold medals to them all. In the same way, a tree can "determine" victory over an unbeatable

opponent and grant salvation for all eternity for all of humanity. The irony of both Satan and God using trees to overcome is best summed up in the Proper Preface for Holy Week, the part of the liturgy which introduces the celebration of the sacrament. "It is truly meet, right, and salutary that we should at all times and in all places give thanks unto Thee, O Lord, holy Father, almighty, everlasting God who on the tree of the cross didst give salvation unto mankind that, whence death arose, thence Life also might rise again; and that he who by a tree once overcame might likewise by a tree be overcome, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen"