

"A Crushing Defeat"
Genesis 3:1-21

March 5, 2017

First Sunday in Lent

Today is the First Sunday in Lent, but you may be surprised to learn that it is not the beginning of Lent. You think, "Ah. That's a trick question. Last week was Ash Wednesday. THAT is the beginning of Lent." I would respond by saying that Ash Wednesday is the beginning of the church season of Lent but it is not the beginning of the reason for Lent. The reason for Lent and the actual beginning of Lent go back many years to the events described in our text for today.

After the Lord God created the heavens and the earth, there was no need for a time like Lent with all of its emphasis on sin and repentance. Everything was perfect. Adam and Eve had a most intimate relationship with their Creator in which they interacted with Him face to face. God provided everything they could possibly want or need. He withheld nothing from them and they lacked nothing. What could be better than this?

Satan, in the guise of a serpent, came to convince them that there was indeed something better which they should want and definitely need. How would he do it? This great confrontation with Satan would not be done with force or violence, but through temptation. Satan would not have to compel Adam and Eve to do as he wished. He would convince them to voluntarily do it themselves.

Most people think they know the story. The devil tempted Eve (and then Adam) to eat the apple from the tree. First of all, the text doesn't say that it was an apple. It just says "fruit of the tree in the midst of the garden." Secondly, the temptation was not so much to eat the fruit, but to doubt God's Word and God's love. The devil begins by saying, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" When Eve answers that they may eat the fruit of all trees but not the fruit of the tree in the midst of the garden or they would die, the devil lies and says, "You will not surely die."

While Eve thinking about that, the devil tempts her to doubt God's love for her and her husband. He says, "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." In other words, God is holding back on you. There is something that you want and need which God is not letting you have. Without actually saying it in so many words, the devil is telling Eve that she should do what SHE wants and get what SHE needs, regardless of what God has said.

And Eve does exactly that. She rejects God's clear word regarding the matter. She justifies what she is about to do by noticing that the fruit is good for food; it looked good; and it would do something good for her – make her wise. She eats the fruit and gives some to Adam who has been silently standing next to her the whole time. Just as the temptation was not for Adam and Eve to eat the fruit but to doubt the Word of God, the real sin here was not the actual eating of the fruit but them thinking they had a better idea than God and doing that instead of God's will.

This was a great victory for the devil who had already rebelled against God and wanted the crown jewel of God's creation to join him in his rebellion. It was a crushing defeat for humanity. As a result, God put His creation under a curse. Adam and Eve would be sent out from the presence of God in the Garden of Eden. There would be great pain and difficulty for them in fulfilling their vocations in childbearing and farming. Instead of living forever, they would die and return to the ground. For they were dust and would return to dust.

We experience a crushing defeat at the hands of the devil, as well. We are tempted just like Adam and Eve were. The devil's ultimate goal is not just to get us to do bad things, but to doubt the Word of God. He says to us, "Did God really say...?" when we face moral and ethical issues. Did God really say that we should be in church on Sundays? Did God really say that it's wrong to kill a child in the womb? Did God really say that assisting with suicide is always wrong? Did God really say that premarital sex or living together is a sin? Did God really say that homosexuality or transgenderism is wrong?

Either by ignorance of the Scripture or willful rebellion against it, we buy these temptations and fall into sin. Like Adam and Eve, the sin is not so much the activity itself, but the attitude that says we have a better plan than God and can justify the activity we do. If an activity does something good in our eyes, looks good in doing so, and provides a benefit, then what's wrong with doing it? We have better ways to use our Sundays than just hearing His Word and receiving His gifts and God should be okay with that. Leisure activities do so much good for ourselves and our families. Our right to privacy and autonomy mean we can end lives in the womb or on the death bed. Doing so solves many problems and is so compassionate. Sexual satisfaction is another right which allows us to take part in any sexual activities which give us pleasure, whether within marriage, outside of marriage, or through a redefinition of marriage or gender. Besides, doing these things will make so many people happy and that's a good thing, right?

The curse which sin brought to Adam and Eve and to the world still applies today. We suffer because of what Adam and Eve did. We inherit their sinfulness when we were born. We are separated from the

presence of God. We suffer great pain and difficulty as we strive to live in this broken world with all of its problems as a result of sin: poverty, sickness, hatred, natural disasters, and the like. And we, too, are dust and will return to dust again in death.

But in the midst of the crushing defeat of Adam and Eve by the devil, the Lord God gave a promise. From that point on, there would be enmity – hatred and conflict – between the offspring of the devil and the offspring of the woman. Finally, One born of the woman would come and do battle against the devil. He would crush the devil's head – completely destroying him – while the devil would bruise His heel – painfully injuring Him.

He would overcome the temptations of the devil on behalf of humanity where humanity, including you and me, had failed. He would do what was right where we had done wrong and God would credit His obedience to our account. He would overcome sin on behalf of humanity where humanity, again including you and me, had sinned and endure the wrath of God against sin for us. The punishment He endured for sin would be considered sufficient for our sins and we would be forgiven.

That brings us to our Gospel reading for today where this is fulfilled. Jesus comes to the desert for a rematch of the Battle of Eden. Only instead of the devil taking on mere mortals like Adam and Eve or you and me, he is facing the Son of God in human flesh. The devil tries the same tired temptations that he used in the garden. Reject the will of God, Jesus, and satisfy your own desires by making bread out of stones. Reject what God has said in His Word and do your own thing, Jesus, by showing off and jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple and float to the ground. Be in control of your life and exercise personal power, Jesus. All it takes is bowing down and worshipping me.

The devil, who is used to winning when it comes to tempting human beings, fails this time. Jesus refuses the devil's temptations and issues the devil a crushing defeat. Jesus has won a great victory over the devil and his power to deceive, tempt, and lead people away from God. We share in his victory by faith. His victory over the devil's temptations becomes our victory over the devil's temptations.

But Jesus is not done. This is only the beginning. We begin Lent with Jesus' first victory – over temptation – and we end Lent with Jesus' final victory – over sin. Only this time, the battle is not in a garden or the desert but on a cross. The devil, speaking through religious leaders, a surly mob, Roman soldiers, and those executed with Him, tempt Jesus to come down from the cross, forsake the Father's plan of salvation and save Himself. But Jesus stays on the cross, enduring the suffering and pain; the forsaking of His Father in heaven; and all the punishment due the sin of the world. He pays the full price of redemption for your sin, my sin, and the sin of the entire world.

Jesus has dealt the devil another crushing defeat. The devil has lost his power to frighten us. He cannot make us feel guilt or despair over our sin because Jesus has paid the price and they are forgiven. The devil cannot make us feel fear or dread over the consequences of our sin because, as the Scripture says, "through death [Jesus] 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) Through Jesus' death, we receive life after death with Him forever. The devil may be a roaring lion as St. Peter says (1 Peter 5:8), putting on an intimidating front for us, but he is a toothless lion. He cannot hurt us.

Jesus has one more final crushing defeat to inflict on the devil. And that defeat has already begun. After dying and being buried, Jesus descended into hell to announce His victory over death and hell. He rose from the dead three days later to show that victory and proclaim it to the world. He ascended into heaven forty days after that to declare that victory throughout heaven itself. And some day, any day now, He will return to this earth to claim that victory for us and all who have faith in Jesus.

When Jesus comes again, He will deal the devil one final crushing defeat and Jesus' victory will be complete. Death and the devil will be thrown into the lake of fire. (Rev. 20:10, 14) Eden will be restored perfectly as it was before the fall into sin. We shall all eat the fruit of the tree of life and live forever. There will be no more temptations for there will be no more devil. There will be no more sin and, thus, no more suffering and no more death. With no more devil, no more sin, and no more death, there will be no more threat of hell. There will only be life in the presence of God in heaven forever.

Usually, we mourn a defeat, especially a crushing defeat. We feel sorry for those who have been defeated and experience a very somber mood when discussing the defeat. Since there is so much talk about suffering, pain, and death during Lent, many would mourn for what happened to Jesus, feel sorry for Him, and experience only a somber mood during this time. But the crushing defeat which Lent commemorates is not Jesus' defeat, but the devil's defeat. Therefore, we rejoice over that, feel gratitude for what Jesus has done, and praise God for His love and mercy toward us at this time. In the end, it is a resounding victory for Jesus and for us, too. Amen.