

Pastor T. C. Arnold
1st Sunday in Lent
Genesis 2:7-9, 15-17; 3:1-7
February 18th, 2018

Every time I read the opening chapters of Genesis, I shake my head in amazement, astonishment, and sometimes even anger. It happened again as I studied these chapters. When I consider the creation of this world by the powerful Word of God, the great care God took making man and woman, and His wonderful love in preparing their home – the Garden of Eden – I’m amazed and astonished at God’s wonderful, gracious love for His world. Then I’m angered by the foolishness and arrogance of our first parents, who tossed it all away by believing the lying, tempting words of “that slithering serpent,” Satan.

How could they do it? Yet, I know better than to say I wouldn’t have done it because I probably would. So would you! Satan’s temptations are hard to resist. The devil is a formidable foe and a forceful factor in the world. The temptation to see what God sees – understand what God understands is a desire that any one of us would have given in to if we were in that position. As Christians, we must take Satan and his cunning seriously because our eternal fate and future hang in the balance.

Temptation really is the devil’s tool. Temptation is what causes us to look away from what God would want for us and look towards what we want, desire, covet, and lust after for ourselves. In the Gospel text for today Matthew recounts the devil tempting Jesus in the wilderness. He tempted Jesus with bread as Jesus fasted. “*All you have to do is to turn these stones into bread.*” Jesus says, “*Man does not live by bread alone.*” With how fast we are tempted by food – how fast we fall away from diets, I’m sure we would have succumb to that temptation – but not the Lord. Satan then shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and says, “*all you have to do is bow down and worship me – and all these will be yours.*” With our desire to have what we don’t have – gain riches that we lack – I’m sure we would have been very tempted to take Satan up on that offer, but not the Lord Jesus. Jesus says in response, “*Away from me Satan – For it is written: Worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.*”

Now, looking back to the Garden of Eden again -- the tactics Satan used in the garden are still his tactics today. Satan questions God and his Word: “*Did God really say?*” Did he? Well, yes; but does He mean it? He contradicts God’s commands: “*You will not die.*” – At least not right away. God doesn’t mean that. He said it just to frighten you. And Satan makes promises of his own – promises that are unbelievably believable. “*Your eyes will be opened.*” You will “*know good and evil.*” Sure enough – “the eyes of both of them were opened.” On top of that they didn’t fall dead on the spot. Satan said, “*You will not surely die.*” In fact, Adam lived for centuries and then he died. The promise Satan makes to us sounds as good and believable as these lies.

Folks, we are “lied to” all the time and we are tricked into thinking to ourselves – “*Did God really say...*” before we are tempted by someone else or this world into doing something that is not God-pleasing. I want you to be aware of something. When Adam and Eve took that fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they were telling God something. You see, what they were saying is what Satan wanted them to believe. They were saying, “God, I don’t need to depend on you. I need to be independent. I want to see what you see. I want to know what you know.” The problem was – God knew that knowing and seeing what only He could see would end up killing His beautiful, perfect creation. And that’s what it did.

Brothers and sisters in the Lord, this same thing kills us every day. In other words when we take it upon ourselves to be independent from God, we tell God, “We can do it by ourselves. We don’t need you or your guidance.” And when this is our attitude we are much more apt to fall into sin. We are much more apt to do what tempts us rather than what the Lord tells us to stay away from. We are more apt to listen to ourselves rather than His Word. And those things that we end up doing apart from God hurt us – our relationship with God – even so far as our relationship with others. It tears at the foundation of our families. It chips away at the foundation of your church. It not only hurts you but it hurts God. It hurts

the people you love. That's when our independence from God's direction really does cause a great deal of damage. It did in the garden – it still does today.

Beloved in the Lord, Wednesday we began a journey. We started down a path that will lead us to Passion Week and then to the place where Jesus would be crucified. This is the season of Lent. The penitential color of violet adorns our chancel area. This color reminds us of our King. They would throw a purple robe around him and put a crown of thorns on Him to mock Him as a King of the Jews. It reminds us that our Savior who was tempted in the desert by Satan, who healed many, was ridiculed by many more – who will make his way into Jerusalem in a matter of a few more weeks is the King of all Kings and most importantly – has a Kingdom not of this world.

But all that is placed on us today so that we can be reminded of something far greater that our Lord did for us. You see, even after the fall of man in the Garden of Eden, our Lord wasted no time putting a plan into place that would save us. His plan was give His own son into death so that He could take our place on the cross. The season of Lent causes us to reflect on the fact that it should be us with the crown of thorns. It should be us with the purple robe. It should be us taking the beating with the whips and chains. It should be us taking the cross to Golgotha. It should be us being nailed to that tree between two thieves. It should be us being put to death. But not so – our Lord knew what He would do. He would give His son – our Savior Jesus on the cross for our sins in our place. His plan was put forth to save us.

And now what “means” does He give us? So much. By His means of His body and blood He comes to us and strengthens us. Baptism, too, is one of those means that the Lord has so graciously placed His name on our hearts. He calls us His very own through simple water and attaches Himself to us in our hearts. When we have the opportunity to see a Baptism here we are reminded of what God did for us. God placed His name on your heart. He does the same thing for you today. Because of what we have in Christ, we know we can defeat Satan's assaults.

There's a story of a marquee of a movie theater in Omaha, Nebraska that showed a man dressed as a devil because the current movie was about Satan. The man was dressed in red, had a long tail, pitchfork, and horns. A little girl, walking by with her mother, looked at the figure and was frightened, “What's that?” she asked her mother. “Oh,” Mother replied, “Don't be frightened. That's only the devil.”

As parents of children today we want to protect our young ones. We want to make sure they aren't frightened or scared. We want to make sure they don't get hurt. But as you know, there is bad fear, and there is good fear. I want our kids to be frightened (properly understood) of strangers. I want our kids to be frightened of traffic while playing. When they get older, I want them to be cautious, scared even (properly understood) of drunk drivers, of doing the wrong thing, of getting into trouble. I want our kids, now and for the rest of their lives to be frightened of the devil.

Parents – part of understanding sin and temptation is understanding how powerful they are. We need to be cautious and we need to teach our children to be cautious – to fear it. It's okay to be afraid in certain situations. Our fear and caution of the devil will, God willing, help us to see more clearly how the Lord turns us back to Himself.

And that's exactly what He does. Our Lord turns us to Himself. That's what we anticipate at the end of Lent. Jesus turning us back to the Lord by washing away our sins on the cross. He turns us to Himself by what He was able to provide for us when we mess up – when we are tempted, when we fall away. He brings us back.

As we throw aside our independence and rely with dependence on God we ask His forgiveness for what we have done and left undone. And it's a joy to know our Lord is not done with us. He works on us every day. Be patient, we have seen, the Lord isn't done with us yet. He's not done with us as He works to improve our lives – His work on the cross for our life everlasting is done. “It is Finished” the Lord cries and we can be confident it is. He has done the work. Our victory has been won. Amen
The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.