

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC - March 1, 2020**  
**Lent 1st Sunday of Year A      Gen 2:7-9; 3:1-7, Mt 4:1-11**

Today's first reading from the book of Genesis, the story of the men and women in the garden, is a challenging one, because it confronts us with the question "What does it all mean?" Some would read this story as if the passage were reporting an actual event that took place in the pre-historic past. It is not like an Eye Witness News Account of something as it happened. These opening chapters of the Bible do not intend to teach history or science, but wisdom: an understanding of who we are, who God is for us, and who we are to be for each other.

So, to grasp that wisdom, we are invited to locate, to find ourselves in this story. We can begin to do this by reflecting on a time when we also lived "in the garden," in a state of Paradise, when we were supremely happy, when we possessed total bliss. You may say, "never," but I would submit that for each of us there was indeed that time, inaccessible to memory, buried deep within our past, but quite real, nonetheless, and exerting still it's lingering effect upon the present. If you cannot recall that time, just bring to mind the image of all the smiling, contented infants you have seen, resting in their mother's lap, and how they are fed when they are hungry, they are dried when they are wet, they are cuddled when they are cold--how their every need is met.

Those first months of our life were for us, too, like Paradise, when our mothers seem to exist only for our gratification, when we were surrounded by abundance and pleasure, when our mother was not even recognized as being separate from ourselves, but experienced only as providing that total manifold of warmth, security, and protection in which we were enveloped. That "pre-conscious" state of oneness of the infant with his mother is one where total harmony, utter security and consolation reigned supreme. That was when we lived "in the garden." Just consider for a moment the appeal of all those pictures of the Madonna and Child, and might not their popularity be due to the fact that they resonate with our own early, though dimly remembered, experience of a time when every impulse was indulged, every feeling caressed, every drive untrammelled and every craving nourished. That was our taste of Paradise, lost forever now in the mists of time.

In the story of the man and woman in the garden, God is depicted as providing for their every need. This story is better seen not as something that "happened," long ago, but as something that happens, that continues to happen, to every person born into our world. The book of Genesis means the book of "beginnings," but the

“beginnings” I would like to focus on are not the creation of the human race, but our own beginnings, the development of our own individual human consciousness, and the inevitable shattering of that blissful state of oneness with our environment.

What Genesis speaks of as “the eating of the forbidden fruit” can be seen as a depiction in a mythic, poetic way of the infant’s fall into consciousness: the beginning of the baby’s dim awareness that he is somehow distinct and apart from his mother, and the fear, confusion, anger, and estrangement generated by that discovery. For the development of consciousness brings along with it the very elemental discovery to the baby that the abundance which surrounds him may at any moment be taken away: that he is not safe; that the source of his bounty, his mother, may disappear and never return. Genesis describes this experience by saying of the man and woman that “their eyes were opened” they come to “know good and evil.” Likewise, once the baby begins to perceive the difference between two things, namely the difference between himself and his mother, once that blissful, preconscious unity is broken up, the baby is thrust out of his earthly paradise.

But, interestingly, the Easter liturgy speaks of this fall from grace as a “happy fault,” “as the necessary sin of Adam.” Genesis is describing the inevitable dawning of human consciousness, the development of the personal “ego,” a sense of self, and with it all the pain and possibility entailed. Individual consciousness, the awareness of reality, is necessary for growth and maturity, but it brings with it anxiety, guilt and suffering. Cast out of the garden, now we dwell in a land “east of Eden,” in an anxious and precarious realm. Having had “our eyes opened,” our return to that paradisaical state is forever barred—we cannot experience that bliss again. As Genesis poetically describes it, there is “an angel with a flaming sword” who guards the portals of Paradise; we can't go home again.

And yet a longing for freedom from conflict, suffering and deprivation is a perennial desire of the human heart. We want to get back to what we have lost; we want to get back to that place where we were safe and secure. We want to get back to the “garden.” And if reality is not able to transport us there, then we will employ fantasy. We will try to reshape our world; we will try to give it our own configuration. We will use the things that surround us not for what they actually are, but for what we want them to be for us. We will exploit them in the hope that they will deliver the peace and joy and bliss we lost in infancy. It is a process that is bound to end in frustration, but that will not deter us. So, the whole point of life will be to learn how to use wisely and well the things with which God has provided us.

In today's Gospel about Jesus being tempted in the desert, we see the basic

ways that human beings can misuse those things God has given us. The story is not simply about Jesus, but also about us, about how we act when we find ourselves in our own personal desert, when there appears to be no way out from the fears that beset us; when, in the words of F. Scott Fitzgerald, "in the dark night of the soul, it is always three o'clock in the morning." We see Jesus as subject to the same fantasies as are we, the same temptation to latch onto something that will banish the deprivation, the frustration, the anxieties of human existence, but we also see in Jesus the way to triumph over those temptations. Let us now look for just a moment at each of them to see how they are mirrored in our own lives.

Jesus is tempted to "turn stones into bread." That for us is the most basic fantasy, the attempt to transform some basically good thing into what is not, but into what we want it to be, and fantasy takes many forms. It is basically the dream-wish that by possessing this secure object close at hand I will be able to banish the insecurity that besets me. And while we know that we cannot change stones into bread, we will use every trick in our book to do almost the same. We may use alcohol or some drug to create that blissful state we dimly remember from the beginning of life. We may overindulge with food because that abundance re-creates the bounty we experienced as infants. We may buy things that we don't really need, make purchases that we can't afford, again because we entertain the fantasy that, by having them, I will somehow be more complete.

Secondly, Jesus is tempted to hurl Himself from the roof of the Temple, as the devil twists the words of Scripture. The sad fact is that we often try to do the same. We may try to make our faith work like magic; we make deals with God, "if I'm good and behave myself, then you, O God, will be good to me." We twist that which is most sacred, religion, so that instead of using our faith to help us engage life more fully and honestly, we use it as a buffer from the pain of human existence, as an escape hatch. No wonder Marx called religion the "opiate" of the people. What an opiate does is to take the edge off of life so that we don't have to engage it fully. Religion can be used wrongly to do the very same thing.

And, thirdly, Jesus is offered all the kingdoms of the world in all their magnificence, which for us, too, is the most seductive of all temptations—the vain hope that material possessions will truly satisfy us; that the control things provide will buffer us from the shocks of life. We may also fall under the spell that we can control people, that we can manage and manipulate them to measure up to our expectations, whether at home, or at work, or in everyday associations. And when they don't perform as we demand, that's when we may resort to the temper tantrums, the shrieks and cries, that always got us what we wanted, when we were back in the bassinet.

The story of the man and woman in the garden communicates the perils and the possibilities that arise from human consciousness, that which distinguishes us from the animals. It delineates the burden of human freedom. The story is true in that it clarifies what is our own personal, interior, psychic development. In a similar way, the story of Jesus being tempted into desert encapsulates what were the three false paths that He could have taken to assume His role as Messiah: miracle worker, religious reformer, political king. But He rejected them all to take on instead the role of the Suffering Servant. By looking at the way in which Jesus responded to His temptations, we get a glimpse of how we should respond as well. Put simply, life is to be lived forwards, not backwards--although always there is the temptation to regress. As sophisticated as we might like to think we are, there is always the tendency to resort to the more insecure, childish aspects of our human nature. As the Irish writer Cyril Connolly remarked, "We all want a womb with a view." We all want to get back home again, back to the earthly Paradise from which we were expelled as infants. So, during these days of Lent, let us see where we can take up the words of St. Paul and put aside are childish ways" to grow to full maturity in the pattern of Christ Jesus.