

## First Sunday of Lent

February 29, 2020 (March 1, 2020) 4:00 p.m. Vigil Mass St. Mark Parish, Niles

There seems to be a growing interest in recent years about our ancestral roots---where we have come from, and who our ancestors are. Perhaps some of you have used “Ancestry.com”, or some of the other services available to take a sample of our DNA, have it analyzed, and “voila”: we are informed about our family origins, what various ethnicities have contributed to the person we are today. Sometimes, we might be surprised, and maybe not always pleasantly, to know who some of our ancestors were. That’s basically what we were hearing in today’s First Reading from the Book of Genesis. We were taken back to the very beginning----to our great, great, great, great, great, great (x 1,000) Parents---Adam and Eve.

As we know, the first part of the book of Genesis tells the story about God’s creation of the world. All matter, all natural things, that God created out of nothing: the heavens and the earth; the seas and the sky; the sun, moon and stars; all the animals, and the “*creepy crawly things*” (as Genesis describes them), and all the fish in the sea; the trees, and all the vegetation and flowers, resulting in the Garden of Eden in the middle of it all. And God saw that each aspect of His creation “*was good*”. But then came the highpoint of all God’s creation, as we heard in our First Reading. Out of the dust of the ground, out of nothingness, God made man (Adam) and from his side God made the woman (Eve). They became living beings, made in the very image and likeness of God, their/our Creator; and God saw that this was “*very good*”!

At the end of the “7 days of Creation, God had made the world; everything was perfect; it was..... “Paradise”! There was harmony among all living things and beings; the human beings lived in total innocence; they experienced total fulfillment and satisfaction. God loved His man and woman, and they loved each other, and their God. How could anything go wrong?!

But it did go wrong, as we heard in today’s Reading, which follows immediately upon the conclusion of God’s creation, and the human story changed for all time. Satan had already waged a battle in Heaven against God and lost, and was cast out of Heaven by Michael and the other Archangels. Satan was jealous and hateful, not only because God rejected him, but more so now because God loved His lowly, human beings. And that’s when Satan developed his “Original Temptation”, which led to the Original Sin, which, in turn, has led to his ongoing, and consistent “modus operandi (m.o.)” through the generations.

As we heard the Book of Genesis tell us, the Serpent was “cunning”, and he knew exactly where Eve’s and Adam’s weak points were: having their freedom limited by that one command that God had given them, not to eat the fruit of the one tree. So, that was the Devil’s entry point. We know how it went: “*Did God really tell you not to eat of the fruit of that tree?*” At first Eve gave the right response, and explained why they were not to eat the fruit of that one tree: “*lest we die*”. That’s when the purely deceitful Devil said: *Oh no you won’t die; God told you that because He knows that if you eat that fruit, you’ll be as good as Him, maybe even better.* And that’s when Eve disobeyed, and then got Adam to do the same. And the die was cast; Paradise was lost; sin entered into the human condition for all time.

So, what is “sin”? It’s a choice that pits us against God---that turns us away from God---that disrupts the relationship with God and with others. We see it right away with what happened between Adam and Eve; their innocence was lost; we heard that they became aware of their nakedness, made fig leaves to cover themselves, and their unity and harmony was deeply

affected. It has been said that the Original Sin was the sin of Pride, one of the 7 Capital Sins, (the others being Lust, Gluttony, Sloth, Greed, Wrath and Envy), because Eve fell for Satan's Lie---that they didn't have to just be human; they could be as good as God, or even better!

How many of our sins find their origin in thinking that we know better than God Himself? We convince ourselves that my plan, my interpretation of Truth, my sense of what is right and wrong is all that matters. "My will be done" rather than "Thy Will be done"! And the Serpent/Satan/the Devil has been committed to doing the same thing to every child of Adam and Eve ever since, including each of us.

If we "fast forward" thousands of years to the Gospel account we heard today, we see that the Devil was so arrogant that he thought He could convince Jesus ---- Whom he knew to be God Incarnate---- to fall down and worship him! St. Matthew lets us see how strategic, and cunning, the Devil is. He didn't come to Jesus at the beginning of the 40 days He was spending in the desert; no, he waited until the end, as we heard: "*He fasted for forty days and nights, and afterwards, He was hungry.*" Then "*the Tempter approached....*"

The 3 temptations that the Devil proposed to Jesus are ones that, perhaps, we've had as well, but certainly in many different forms. The temptation to satisfy ourselves with food/drink, material and sensual pleasures; the temptation to "presume" on God's Love, which is what the sin of "presumption" means; and the temptation to worship false gods; or to put it another way, to have anyONE or anyTHING in place of God's rightful position in our lives, which must be Number One for all of us.

In response to each and every temptation, Jesus put God first! How comforting it is for us to know that Jesus Himself was tempted; we realize that we are in good company when we are tempted so often. But also, how blessed we are to have been given the lesson by Jesus Himself on how we need to deal with each and every temptation: see it for what it is; realize that the Devil is behind it; and (like the old commercial), "just say No"! The Devil continues his frontal attack, and always in his calculated, cunning, and deceitful ways of trying to get us to sin.

Have you ever said to yourself: "Well if it wasn't for Adam and Eve, we could be living in Paradise---in a perfect world?" We can't just blame Adam and Eve; who of us would not have done the same thing; who among us doesn't do the same things much more frequently than any of us like to admit. St. Paul said it so well in our Second Reading today: "*Through one man (and woman) sin entered the world, and through sin, death; and thus, death came to all men/people.*"

That's what Lent is for----to give us the dedicated time of these 40 days to confront the power of sin in our lives, and, with God's grace and through our Lenten practices, to overcome that power of sin, and choose paths of virtue. We are only just beginning this grace-filled Season of Lent. It dawned on me at the beginning of this Lent that I've gone thru an awful lot of Lents, and I still haven't conquered "sin" in my life! And I have to admit, that the older I get, the more I am conscious of the Devil at work in my life, and in the lives of those around us. The Devil is certainly hard at work within the Church these days. He is attacking anyone trying to have strong faith, including bishops, priests, and all of you and all people trying to live good and holy lives. He wouldn't waste his time on those who have no desire to believe in God and follow God's ways. Nope, his focus is on us! And we need to be aware of his deceit, his efforts to turn us against one another, his glee at seeing us fight amongst ourselves, and, he is so pleased when each of us in our own way, think like Adam and Eve that if we make a particular choice, maybe we could be as good as, or even better, than God Himself.

Our First Reading told us that it was out of the dust of the ground that God created the first human being, breathing into the man the “breath of life”. Just 4 days ago, we were all reminded on Ash Wednesday that, we were sprinkled with similar “dust”---that of ashes. When all is said and done, and our lives in this world come to an end, “we are dust, and unto dust we shall return”. But that’s not supposed to discourage us or make us sad, nor to be a cause for us to lose heart. The ashes that were put on our heads were given to us in the shape of the Cross. It’s the Cross of Christ that gives us Hope, and causes us to joyfully live our lives, following the Good News of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It was by His Cross that He has conquered the power of sin and death, and it is thru His resurrection that He has invited us to share in eternal life with Him.

It all comes down to knowing who we are, and Who we are not! We are beloved sons and daughters of God. We are **not** God. But, even though we are not God, we are His beloved creation; God is our Loving Father, and we are His precious sons and daughters. Not only that, we are loved by Jesus, God’s Son, Who died for us, Who gave us Himself here in every Mass through the precious Gift of the Eucharist, to be our Food and Drink. In addition, through our Baptism and Confirmation, we know the indwelling of God’s Holy Spirit, Who gives us His Gifts to lead, encourage, guide and inspire us in making the choices that will always lead us to God.

Again as St. Paul reminded us: “*Just as through one transgression, condemnation came upon all, so through one righteous act (that of Jesus’ salvation), acquittal and life came to all.....Through the obedience of the One, we the many will be made righteous.*” As we go through this Season of Lent, let us keep our eyes on the Cross of Christ which leads us all to the Joy of Easter and the Promise of Eternal Life---to live forever in Paradise re-found!

God bless you, now and always!