

1 Lent 3 March 2011

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

Psalm 32

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

Year A

I.N.I.

Lent is a good time to get down to the roots. Like the health of a tree depends in large part on a healthy root system, our forty-day journey to Easter is worth examining what's underneath our glorious multi-branched church. Dig a little. Search beneath, within. Where are your roots?

Lately, whenever I am with my aging parents, I want to hear stories from way back. I don't want to forget them. I think that somehow, whatever happened to my great grandfather or my grandmother contributes not only to my genetics, but to my emotional system, my "root" system. What does it mean that my paternal great grandfather came to Roxbury, Massachusetts to care for boys in the Martin Luther Orphanage at Brook Farm? What series of events came together for my mother's grandparents to leave Germany and end up on a farm on Long Island, then New Jersey? So I encourage my parents to tell stories, about themselves and their families, to uncover family patterns, and to tell me something about who I am.

It's the same for us who find ourselves in Lent. We tell stories from way back, tales and sagas about the ancestors whose experiences tell us something about who we are, and something about who God is. What did we just sing to welcome the Gospel?

*The Word of God is source and seed;  
It comes to die and sprout and grow.  
So make your dark earth welcome warm;  
Root deep the grain God bent to sow.*

Adam is the earth creature whose very name in Hebrew sounds like the dirt from which he was formed. Eve, the one who was formed from Adam, is so named by the man to sound like life, like earth mother. We call Adam and Eve our spiritual parents, because their story is a root story for every human. So we turn to Genesis, the book of Beginnings.

In that story about the garden, if we tell it well, we hear that the earth mother Eve and her companion Adam come of age. We hear that where they ended up brought them out of an age of innocence.

At the beginning of the story we find that God provides for them in every way, giving them the garden to work, giving them each other for company, giving them the very breath of life. It was all they ever needed.

In today's First Reading, the serpent suggests to the thoughtful woman that perhaps what they had was not enough. There is more out there than meets the eye. Instead of affirming satisfaction with the secure boundaries of Eden, the snake implied that God was withholding important information about morality and mortality. And with the power of suggestion and the man nowhere to be seen, in the end, in the act of (you might say) adolescent rebellion, teenage exploration, the genie could not be put back in the bottle. Adam and Eve grew up.

They learned about shame. They learned about consequences. And while up to this point the framework for life was framed by blessing, in the aftermath of giving in to their desires, the first humans, our grandparents as it were, also discovered curse. To the joys of life were added the vagaries, and notice these were exactly what the serpent predicted: they did not die (yet); their eyes were opened (they knew they were naked!), and; like God, they knew good and evil (so they ran away and hid themselves).

This Adam and Eve story tells us something about who we are: like the weaving of fabric to cover their shame, imperfections are sewn into the fabric of human existence. St. Paul calls this root story "one man's trespass." He might have said instead that it is the wandering of every woman, man, and child. "Curses!" Now there's no way out of this life. Just like our ancestors, we bite off more than we can chew. We allow our desires to have their way with us. Our eyes are opened to the decimations of earth, and sea, and human deception. Ah, knowledge.

We keep telling stories, so that we can know who we are and who God is.

*The Word of God is breath and life;*

*It come to heal and wake and save.*

*So let the Spirit touch and mend*

*And rouse your dry bones from their grave.*

Alongside one temptation story, the one from Genesis, we hear another from the gospels, this one from Matthew. This one is about a new earth creature, one who comes to set the world to rights. The story is about what St. Paul calls "the one man, Jesus Christ" or "one man's obedience."

In this gospel, in this story, the garden has turned into the desert. From the boundaries of safety in the garden of Eden, Jesus has entered into rather chaotic and unwieldy wilds. After just being acclaimed God's beloved Son emerging from baptism in the Jordan, Jesus the new earth creature is apparently is gearing himself up for the vagaries of life knowing that his mission is to bless. This preparation for what's next comes with a forty-day fast, forty being Biblical shorthand for a long time, forty associated with a particularly meaning timeframe for God to bless, as in Noah and the ark (forty days), as in the Israelites in the wilderness (forty years), as in the time that Jonah gives the Ninevites to repent (forty days). And we learn, no surprise, that Jesus is famished.

Into this chaos, into his severe deprivation and hunger, the tempter emerges to offer Jesus a way out. Three times Jesus is offered satisfaction for his own desires: to feed himself

with a miracle; to cast himself in the religious epicenter of the temple with a miracle; to show himself as the world's ruler giving in to the tempter. Each of the three times, Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy. Each of the three times, Jesus says no to the way out.

To the destructive words used by the evil one, Jesus speaks words to destroy temptation. Through his long time of wrestling, in his forty-day ordeal, Jesus, the new one, the earth creature who comes to set the world to rights, does not give in to a way out, but a way through.

There is no detour around life. There is no eternal lottery system, where the one who has the winning ticket lives happily ever after. There is, instead blessing by living through Christ, living in Christ, dying and rising with Christ. This is a good place to start, and end, in Lent.

Our forty-day trip in the wilderness is a gift to the church, to discover our roots, to seek basic nourishment for the life we are given, with its curses and blessings. Like Eve and Adam we discover who we are and that we have limits. We tell stories that reveal our shame and missteps. And we discover our need to reclaim blessing, in garments that clothe us to participate in God's mission of righteousness.

In the story of Genesis we hear in the conclusion today that the man and woman sew loincloths. But further on it says that God God's self made garments for Adam and Eve. After our ancestors experienced curse, God offers blessing in making clothes!

And in Matthew at the conclusion of Jesus' ordeal, angels come and attend to him, no doubt serving food for his hunger.

In the days ahead, I invite you to make the most of this time that we are given to tell our stories, to recognize ourselves in the characters we find in holy writ, and to wonder how we will find our way ahead, our way through.

Think of it as a gift, this time, these stories, this one man Jesus Christ. By receiving and offering blessing anew, we are restored to God. By God's choosing mercy over judgment, we are clothed with garments of righteousness. In our journey to new life, through the desert, telling root stories, to the cross and empty tomb, to baptismal rebirth, we will find the promised land, and the tree of life.

We might even take a little nourishment through a loaf of bread and a cup of wine, and wonder if Christ with us is truly a gift, if not a miracle.

*The Word of God is flesh and grace,  
Who comes to sin, to laugh and cry.  
So dare to be as Jesus was,  
Who came to live and love and die.  
Gaudeamus Domino.*

I.N.I.