

The readings we heard this morning are so much a part of our scriptural heritage that we know where they are going as soon as we see the first few words. Garden of Eden; Adam and Eve; snake; apple. Got it. Jesus in the wilderness; devil tempts him; devil fails. Got it. Falling for temptation or resisting it. Makes perfect sense for the first Sunday in Lent.

We are heirs of Adam, but we are also heirs of Jesus. We are born to the life that we inherited from Adam, and there's nothing we can do about that, but we are free to accept the redemption offered by Jesus. Traditional theology teaches that Adam didn't resist temptation, and his fall into sin separated humankind from God, but Jesus **did** resist temptation, and through him humankind was reconciled to God. One man led us into sin; another man showed us the way out.

It works as a simple contrast between falling and not falling. And if we take one step back, the contrast between the garden and the wilderness is effective as well. The wilderness was frightening and dangerous; the garden was beautiful and perfect. And there was temptation in both places.

The garden story tells us that there is more to us than the dust from which we are made, but that the very same qualities that make us more than dust can also lead us astray. The people were an integral part of the garden, with responsibilities and obligations that held creation together.

The garden was **good**, but it had to be looked after. It needed care and work, and the people had work to do. As long as they looked after the garden, it provided everything they needed. The garden fed their bodies and their souls: they had the time and the capacity to enjoy creation, to talk with God, to roam the garden, and to enjoy one another's company. But there was also danger in the garden: a danger that could spoil all the good things they had.

Have you ever wondered why God put that dangerous tree in the garden? Why not just leave

it out? Why not just create the world as a perfect place, where nothing could ever go wrong, and no bad things ever happened? That's the big question we all ask, isn't it? Why do bad things happen in God's creation?

Some people will tell you that it's all a test. The tree was put there to test whether Adam and Eve would obey God. And, by the same reasoning, bad things happen to us just to test our faith and obedience. Personally I find that reasoning quite repulsive, and, more importantly, it completely contradicts what Jesus taught us about God's love. We weren't created to provide amusement.

Nor were we created to be biodegradable garden ornaments. If there was nothing in creation that could ever do us any harm, and there were no choices to be made, then there would be no free will, and no point in existing.

The Genesis story tells us that we are not garden ornaments: we are much more than the dust from which we are made. We have souls; and we have choices. We have work to do, and we need to take time to enjoy one another's company and time to talk with God. But we must also watch out for the enticements that lead us astray. All of that is who we are.

The story also tells us who God is: God creates. God is busy doing and making, planting and forming, and breathing life into things. Everything said about God is active verbs. God transforms nothing into something good.

The serpent on the other hand doesn't. He just talks. He doesn't create or transform. He only talks. And through his talking, he destroys the trust that the people have in God, and leads them into doubt and greed.

First he shakes their faith in God, suggesting that God has lied to them, and doesn't really care about them. "Never mind about all the good things that God has given you" he says. "Never mind about the abundance and joy that you already have; think instead about what God doesn't want you to have."

When they start thinking that they are missing something, that what they have isn't enough, they start to think that there's something better they could get if they turn their backs on God and reach for it. Right. The details may change, but the thinking that leads to the wrong path is still basically the same.

In the garden, Satan disrupts the relationship between God and people. Adam and Eve are enticed to do what they know they shouldn't. And when they've made that choice, it's not nearly as exciting as it sounded. And they soon find out that making that choice has destroyed something good. So they run and hide, and when they get caught, they blame one another and make excuses.

The wilderness was a powerful image for the contemporaries of Jesus. It was a fearsome place where people got lost. A place of great danger. A place where people died of thirst, or hunger, or heat, or animal attack. But it was also a place where people went to think and pray, and wrestle with their fears.

It was a place to meet God, one way or another: a place to meet death or find redemption. Anyone in the wilderness was searching. Either they were lost, and searching for a way out before the wilderness killed them, or they were searching to re-connect with God before their alienation from God killed them.

We understand the metaphor of the wilderness: the place of fear and loneliness, of confusion and sorrow; searching for the path that will connect us to God and lead us out into safety. Who hasn't been there at some point in life?

Jesus wasn't lost. He went to the wilderness to think; to pray; to prepare himself. To choose his path. Adam, living in a place of beauty and plenty, let doubt and greed lead him down the wrong path. Jesus, all alone in a place of desolation and starvation, faced the same temptations: "**IF** you really are that special..., why not take what you want? **IF** God really cares about you, make him give you what you want." But Jesus didn't take that path.

We are all born as heirs of Adam and Eve, and there's nothing we can do about that, but we don't have to take the path they took. We can choose to be heirs of Christ; we can choose to follow his path. But it is a choice, and it is a choice we have to work at, and keep working at.

On Ash Wednesday we were reminded that we are made from dust and will return to dust. "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return." Lent is the time that we need to recognize and nurture that part of us which is **not** made of dust. Only our souls last for ever. During these weeks of Lent, we need to think carefully about what path our souls are on.