

Lent A1 Gen 2:15-17, 3:1-7 Matt 4:1-11

Christopher Fry in his "A Sleep of Prisoners" has this line:

"Affairs are now soul-size. The enterprise is exploration into God."

Lent for us begins with sooty foreheads, as many of us received the mark here or somewhere else on Ash Wednesday, with the reminder to all of us that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. That marking and those words were not intended to depress or frighten us, but to simply remind us that after all we are human beings. We are mortals, and not God....And it is quite important to get that straight.

It also happens to be a startling way of reintroducing us to our beginnings---and not just to that pile of dust in Eden out of which we were formed---but to that **great big mistake** made by the mother and father of us all, **well before they had caught on to what it means to be human!**

God said, "Don't eat the fruit"; but they ate the fruit and the rest is history, as they say.

They could have become immortal. They might have occupied that idyllic garden spot forever, but no. Like the proverbial cat, their curiosity got the best of them. They royally flunked the test God gave them.

"You are dust, and to dust you shall return." That was the sentence God pronounced that day, and we have inherited it from them, along with their curiosity and a few other important things.

Thankfully, Adam and Eve are not our only ancestors. We have a more blessed kinship, and this story has also been read for us on this first Sunday of Lent---how the Spirit led newly-baptized Jesus, not into a garden but into a **wilderness**, an uninhabited place, a place of solitude, unfamiliarity, threat, and even danger – wild animals and evil spirits - where he too was presented with a test; but he passed it. I think we can say that his test was harder.

There was nothing as definite as a tree to avoid, to stay away from, not a specific set on instructions from God about what to do and what not to do. And still, he managed to say a strong no to three very tempting and tantalizing opportunities--- and therefore kept himself in tact, emerging from the desert wilderness as the same person he had gone in it---the beloved Son of God.

Tradition has tended to blame Eve for the first story. Certainly her partner Adam did. But

St. Paul never mentions her. The big point here is that God drew a line in the garden of Eden and said, “Human beings on this side, God on this side. Tree of life on your side, tree of the knowledge of good and evil on my side. Now stay on your own side of the line if you know what’s good for you.”

The trouble was that that was not good enough for the first human couple. God had gone to the bother of giving them brains to think with, and a snake to talk things over with.

They could plainly see that the tree was good for food and delightful to look at.

The serpent put forward the thought, that one could only conclude that God’s reason for forbidding it was that God did not want them to be as smart as God was.

So they decided to trust their own logic over God's command, and before they could mount a convincing defense when challenged by God, they were looking for a new place to live.

The second story comes to a different ending. It has a very scary beginning, with Jesus and the devil in a verbal duel. And the devil quoting scripture like a scholar or preacher. (This could be a lesson to all of us; just because someone knows the Bible 'chapter and verse' does not mean that person is up to any good!)

Jesus' loyalty was at stake. Would he remain faithful to God or be seduced by the devil's interesting suggestions?

The line drawn in this story is just as clear and definite as in the first one. Jesus could play God or he could remain human. Just that simple. He could go buzzing around in the air turning the desert into a gourmet bakery--- or he could keep his feet on the ground and live with the ache in the pit of his stomach, remaining as hungry as anyone would be after a six-week fast.

Three times he was tempted and three times he said no. He refused to step over the line God had drawn. For the moment, the devil was defeated.

Our all too common conception seems to be that crossing over the line is about doing things that make us less than admirable human beings. Lent comes along and we give up things that are bad for us, or take on things that are good for us---as if the most serious temptations of life were to drink too much wine or eat too much fat or stay in bed on Sunday morning with the NYT!

But consider for a moment that these stories are not about that at all. I do not think that they are about the temptation not to be a good human being.

They are about the temptation not to be a human being at all!

As far as I can discover, what Adam and Jesus are both tempted by is the chance to play God. In Adam's case, it was the chance to break out of his dependence on God and know both good and evil for himself.

In Jesus' case, it was the chance to feed every hunger, to be superman, to control all the kingdoms of the earth. Come to think of it, God never offers those things--- the tempter is the only one offering them, and with a thousand conditions and strings attached!

However, whereas Adam stepped over that line and found humanity to be a curse, Jesus stayed behind the line and made humanity a blessing! As St. Paul writes to the Romans, one man trespassed - one man stayed put.

One tried to be God - one was content to remain a human being. And the irony is that the one who tried to be God did not do too well as a human being---while the one who was content to be human became known as the Son of God.

As we enter the thoughtful - the 'soul size' - season of Lent and take some intentional moments to be still within ourselves, we do well to acknowledge that both Adam and Jesus are alive and well in us. You can feel them tugging at you most days of your life.

But if Adam's story, dust and all, is our story, then Jesus' story is ours as well. We have both sets of genes in us. We are kin to both of them.

And when the Adam in us is powerfully tempted to play God---the Jesus in us is more powerfully able to remain human---offering to keep us company on our own side of that line---and showing us that the way to discover our blessed Godlikeness is not to curse our humanity, but to bless it---

To enter into our humanity as fully as we dare, living a human-sized life, this side of Eden.

This side of Eden, where the God who made us from the dust of the earth offers to breathe life into us again and again.

Frederick Buechner, in "Wishful Thinking," writes:

"To say that God drove Adam and Eve out of Eden is apparently a euphemism for saying that Adam and Eve like the rest of us made a break for it as soon as God happened to look the other way. If God really wanted to get rid of us, the chances are he wouldn't have kept hounding us every step of the way ever since."

We can use this opportunity of Lent for an 'exploration into God'... to turn again and again, and face, in all of our humanity, the One who hounds us, pursues us, beckons us, this side of Eden.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke, writes:

"God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks silently out of the night.

These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your recall, go to the limits of your longing.

Embody me.

Flare up like flame

And make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.

Just keep going. No feeling is final.

Don't let yourself lose me.

The edge that they call life is approaching.

You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand. ”