

Heavenly Father, may the words I speak be those You want spoken, may the words we hear be those You want heard, and may we live to Your glory through hearts, minds and lives that are ready to be challenged, and changed, as you lead us.

Sin...on the surface, it appears that this is the topic of the day for today's readings, which is not surprising as we entered Lent this week. However, as a lay leader who often feels like she is "faking until she makes it" when offering homilies, I have to say, speaking about something as broad and complex as sin seemed a bit intimidating at first, but anyone who knows me, I don't typically shy away from a challenge. So, please join me on this journey of introspection regarding sin and reconciliation.

In our first reading, we revisit a Biblical story that most or all of us would say we are very familiar with – the story of what is traditionally known as the "fall," the Bible's first temptation and act of disobedience by Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. God tells Adam that he and Eve can eat from all, but one tree in the garden, the tree of **knowledge** of good and evil. This tells us that good and evil already existed and yet God made it such that Adam and Eve had no awareness of them. So I asked myself, why might this be? And it reminded me of the saying "Ignorance is bliss and knowledge is power". If one is unaware of something, yes, they can go along living their lives in blissful ignorance, but the price for living this way is that we cannot influence change or even recognize there is a need for change. We lack purpose and could blindly move through life having sin and evil eat away at the world and in the people around us. This also reminds me of when I first learned that sheep would walk off a cliff. Why? Because they are docile animals that love to follow the lead of someone they think is the leader. So, if that leader walks off the cliff, they will happily follow them to their death. It also makes me think of "blind faith" and how dangerous this can be. One can say that something seems logical, but this is an easy way of going wrong with confidence. How often have religious organizations used the Bible as justification for exclusion and yet Jesus preaches tolerance and how often have world leaders used the Bible as justification for taking land that was not theirs, imprisoning people, and starting wars and yet Jesus teaches us that we are to share with those less fortunate, to defend the weak, and to be forgiving.

So, by eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge, humans took on the responsibility of recognizing good and evil when one comes across it and more importantly, discerning what is good and what is evil. Yes, in doing so, we lost our blissful ignorance, but we also gained the ability to influence change and to be advocates for the weak,

to seek justice, and to strive for peace. As the reading progresses, we hear of the serpent. A wild animal that the Lord God made. So, again, temptation and sin, represented here as the serpent were already in the world, but Adam and Eve were theoretically ignorant to their existence. Now the serpent gives a slightly different message than God relayed to Adam. The serpent says that they will not die, but instead their eyes will be opened and in turn, humans will have discernment of good and evil, just as God already does. So, the serpent is tempting Adam and Eve with the opportunity to gain wisdom and in turn, the potential to be closer to God through being more like him. So, I don't know about you, but I don't find it surprising that Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge. Especially given that they had no knowledge that evil even existed and thus wouldn't have even thought to see one of the creatures God created as "evil". It makes me think of a parent telling a child that they should not stick a fork in an electrical socket or else they could electrocute themselves and yet a young child doesn't even understand what the repercussions of electrocution might be, including the concept of their own mortality. So, if you are going to tell someone not to do something, you should probably give the warning in perspective to something they can understand the repercussions of.

So, now I move onto Paul's letter to the Romans, this is an example of a Bible reading where you have to read it over and over again and draw flow charts to make heads or tails of what you are reading, only to realize there is a basic message buried in it. Paul starts by telling the Romans that Adam brought sin into the world, which we just talked about, was not actually the case. So, Paul then goes on to explain that sin was already here, but Adam and Eve brought awareness of sin into the world and "death" of ignorance came through their sin of eating of the tree of knowledge and now the knowledge of sin has been passed to all people that came after them. And it is this "original sin" that led to judgment and condemnation of humans, but Jesus' gift and God's grace far exceed all human sin and thus we are made righteous. So, essentially, Jesus wiped the original slate, which was created by Adam and Eve, clean through his crucifixion.

Thus, we finally move to the Gospel reading in Matthew – immediately before this reading, Jesus goes into the wilderness where he is baptized and while standing in the baptismal waters, he hears a voice from heaven saying "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Jesus is then lead by the Spirit, or God, into the wilderness where he is tempted by the devil. Jesus has the benefit of going into the wilderness to face

temptation with the knowledge that he is God's son, is beloved, and that his Father is pleased with him. Something which Adam and Eve were not afforded, and thus could have made them more vulnerable to influence by the serpent. And for Adam and Eve, they understood from God that if they ate of the tree of knowledge, they would die. Whereas, Jesus knew that God's love and acceptance were not contingent upon whether or not he gave into the temptations put before him by the devil. God's grace is absolute and in knowing this, Jesus could remain faithful.

Now, Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days and the Israelites were in the desert for 40 years. When the devil tempts Jesus, Jesus replies with Scriptural affirmations from the Old Testament referencing the Israelites time in the desert. The Israelites wandered as punishment for their mistrust in God; however, Jesus fasts and faces temptation as an opportunity to prove his trust in God and in turn, his trustworthiness in his journey ahead where he will commence his public ministry. Just as the Israelites emerged from their wanderings chastened, purified, and ready to inherit God's blessings and promises, Jesus emerges from his journey with the devil, confirmed in his identity and purified and strengthened for his mission. So, this Bible passage links Jesus to the past of his ancestors, but also marks him as superior to them and marks a new era for the people of God.

So now that we've come full circle on this journey of sin from the garden of Eden, to Jesus' temptation by the devil in the garden, to Paul's letter to the Romans regarding original sin and Jesus' sacrifice leading to righteousness, I asked myself how can we apply the messages of these Biblical texts to our Lenten journey. Lent has historically been thought of as a time of self-flagellation, a time to give up something so as to punish oneself so that we can relate to Jesus' suffering on the cross. However, if we return to the garden of Eden, we gained knowledge or discernment of good and evil in the world. And Jesus showed that by having faith in his Father's promise that he is beloved, he was ready to do the mission he is called to do, to minister to God's people. And Paul tells us that we are made righteous through Jesus' sacrifice and therefore, this knowledge should drive God's people forward into the world to make God's plan a reality. But, just as Jesus needed to fast for forty days and nights, so do we. But not "fast" literal food, but "fast" from the noise of our daily lives, from all the distractions that take us from our relationship with God and just as importantly, our relationship with ourselves.

Have you ever done a deep self-introspection of yourself? Either on your own or with a professional? So often we never stop in our lives to look in the mirror. To ask ourselves, what might be barriers that are preventing us from using my God-given gifts for the purpose God intended. Trauma – something everyone has experienced. Now, you may say to yourself, no, I've never experience trauma. However, I think this is highly unlikely given the world we live in and the challenges we face in our families, communities, and world, but if you were one of the lucky ones, that changed with the birth of Covid. So, the bad news is that we all know what it's like to experience trauma, but the good news is that we all know what it's like to experience trauma. Through shared experience, we, through self-introspection, can learn empathy.

Have you ever had an experience where you were interacting with someone and you said something and immediately the other person began to what you might describe "over-react"? Did you know, that this is likely a sign of trauma. Over-reaction comes from a place of previous trauma in which the current event triggers the individual by making them relive the same, or a similar, feeling they felt during their previous traumatic event. As such, how have you responded to a person's over-reaction in the past? Did you get defensive? Did you begin to argue with them and the experience then escalated until you both left the conversation feeling distraught, angry, and confused? In my personal experience, I observed these types of interactions throughout my life, but have seen an uptick in these interactions over the last several years. So, what this tells me is that many people have suffered trauma and Covid and all the repercussions of it have only exacerbated things for many people. So, I asked myself, how might we use the gift of discernment of good and evil we received through Adam and Eve's apparent original sin and Jesus' reconciliation between God and his people through his crucifixion, to use for our journey in Lent this year? How might we gain insights into our own traumas so we might learn to control our overreactions to perceived re-traumatization? How might we learn empathy for others when we recognize their over-reactions as a response to prior trauma they have suffered? I encourage us to take time during Lent to look deep within ourselves for the barriers that prevent us from living into God's call. That result in our resistance to change, that lead us to engage in exclusionary behavior and actions, that stop us from loving all of God's people. We must use the next 35 days, not to abuse ourselves, but to look within to heal ourselves and to reconcile ourselves to God. To acknowledge that Lent can be a time of healing.

A time of growth and maturity. Of forgiveness, peace, and hope. So, that as Jesus began his ministry, we can begin to live more fully into our own ministry not only in this building, but far beyond these walls. So, I leave you with the words of Pope Francis:

# DO YOU WANT TO FAST THIS LENT?

*In the words of Pope Francis*

- Fast from hurting words and say kind words.
- Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude.
- Fast from anger and be filled with patience.
- Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope.
- Fast from worries and have trust in God.
- Fast from complaints and contemplate simplicity.
- Fast from pressures and be prayerful.
- Fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy.
- Fast from selfishness and be compassionate to others.
- Fast from grudges and be reconciled.
- Fast from words and be silent so you can listen.

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