

1st Sunday of Lent cycle A

What makes a paradise, paradise? It would have to be a place of no pain: not the pain of hunger, or of fatigue, or of suffering. There would be no want for anything: every need would be satisfied, and kept satisfied all the time. There would be no discomfort: never too hot, and never too cold. And more than the physical aspects, there would be spiritual perfection: no alienation, no discord, no animosity. Those are the negatives, what there wouldn't be; what there would be would be communion with each other, harmony in thought, words, and actions; cooperation. There would be beauty; there would be peace. No worry, whatsoever, that any kind of evil could befall us. And paradise was what Adam and Eve had in the Garden of Eden. God created them to be creatures who would know pure satisfaction rather than enduring want and need, but the key to the satisfaction would lie in knowing who they were, and who's plan could provide for them: and that would be God's plan. In the Gospel passage from Matthew, we are presented with Jesus, the opposite of disobedient Adam; in the desert, which is the opposite of paradise. The desert does not provide for people's needs well. It is dry and parched, little for food and what there is for food isn't terribly tasty; little for water: when the rains do come, it often leads to flooding, and the water is almost immediately soaked up before it can be used. There is little or no shelter: if one is able to find shade, it remains extremely hot even there; and yet the ground doesn't hold the heat, and the cold must be contended with often at night. Because it's not a place hospitable to human habitation, the desert is presented as a lonely place. It is the anti-paradise: a place of temptation, isolation, and dependence on God's providence.

The first reading today becomes the first lesson, of Lent: Adam and Eve expel themselves from paradise. It wasn't like God snuck the fine print past them when they signed the contract; they knew, he was explicit; they knew what obedience to him was, what disobedience was, and what the ramifications were. In a sense, they destroyed paradise by introducing disobedience—and alienation from the Creator—into their world. But while Adam and Eve are expelled from paradise, Jesus goes willingly into the desert. He goes willingly and purposefully into a place where he will know great want, and where he will face great temptations. Jesus is willing to be tempted by Satan in order to serve the people whom he came to save; so very opposite of our first parents, who gave up paradise not only for themselves but also for their offspring, in pursuit of an independence from God which they could only imagine might benefit them. They, a study in selfishness; Jesus, the perfect portrait of self-giving.

And so the contrast and the lesson is placed before us as we begin this Lent; set before us, clearly, not because we're in paradise, but because we are, in many ways, in the desert. We are in a place of temptations on multiple fronts; in a place where our needs are dire, and if not provided for, we die; and we are in a place of dependence, for without God's grace we cannot possibly ever reach anything better. In his first temptation of our Lord, Satan approaches Jesus and tells him "if you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread." How easy would it have been for Jesus to do that one; he who later changed the water into wine at Cana and who multiplied the fish and the loaves for the thousands of people. But it cannot be at Satan's command; Jesus went into the desert in order to deny himself, not to satisfy himself. And Satan loves to tempt *us* with those things which speak to our hungers and our appetites. But the pleasures he proposes are fleeting, and are quickly gone; what he wants to see, is for man to give up eternal goods for passing goods. In his second temptation, the devil takes Jesus to the holy city Jerusalem, to the highest point of the temple, and tells him "if you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; the Father will save you, no?" But while Jesus will do much to prove the love of the Father, he will not put him to the test at Satan's request. He will not turn things around on his Father and demand that the Father obey him. And that's how Satan loves to tempt us with our pride: he knows we know God loves us, loves us so much that he sent his Son to die for our sins so that we could live with him. And Satan wants to see us turn the tables on God and make him prove this love he declares, and require that he obey us. Save us despite our unwillingness to be saved. Embrace us even as we reject him and push him away. Make what's wrong, right; because we say. And the mistake man so often makes is thinking that he can fashion a better order than God can; that we can have licentiousness and hatred and greed in our lives and still make a paradise out of this life. And then, Satan taunts Jesus with the third temptation: taking him up a very high mountain, he shows him all the kingdoms in their magnificence, and said to him "all these I shall give you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me." But Jesus doesn't need things; all things were made through him; with the Father and the Holy Spirit, he is existence itself. And in like fashion, Satan likes to tempt us with things: convince us that we need this that or the other: power, wealth, expensive homes and clothing and gadgets; and so often, these things must come at the expense of others, and our things then become more important than people, and for some, more important than God himself. And they will all pass away eventually; but love remains, and communion with others carries over to the next life, and God is eternal. Once again, he tempts us with the temporal at the cost of the everlasting.

Then the devil left him. Left him, after three futile attempts to turn Jesus against the Father and the Father's will. How many times do we tell him to get away, and how often do we listen to him, and find ourselves a few steps further from God? Part of this season of Lent is standing up to the tempter and saying "I will not be controlled by my desires and my passions, because my feelings and my appetites will one day pass; but I intend to be satisfied in eternity." It's saying "I will not tell God to obey me, because I can provide nothing for myself, but he will provide for all of my needs, here and here after." It's saying "I will not choose fleeting treasures which will one day decay and be reduced to nothing anyway over lasting spiritual goods, because the spiritual goods of love, mercy, and communion will be all that I can take from this life to the next. Satan didn't give up after one try with Jesus, but he did leave, and angels ministered to our Lord instead. It may be hard to say "no" to ourselves and our wants at times; but if we do so, God will quickly send an angel of consolation to remind us that we have made the better choice.

Satan handed man his first temptation and man, in a manner of speaking, opened the envelope and found, not authority over the paradise which he expected to gain, but his walking papers instead: he could not turn paradise into a playground for man's rebellion. Jesus, on the other hand, does not tempt man but *offers* man his freedom from sin and from the effects of sin; and gives man his passport not to an earthly paradise, but to a heavenly, eternal one. It is the first lesson of this Lenten season: recognize the Tempter and recognize the Savior; cultivate contempt for the devil and devotion to the Christ. Know our truest good, and be prepared to claim it at any cost. Use the desert which is this life, to show our love for the Savior who alone can bring us to the true and everlasting paradise—gained only through his cross.

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