

WE ARE JOINT HEIRS

Sermon, March 13, 2011

Texts: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11, Romans 5:12-19

This is the first Sunday in Lent. As we enter this season, a theme of our lectionary Scripture lessons this morning is that we are joint heirs ... we are heirs of two legacies. We are heirs of (1) the legacy of our first parents who succumbed to the serpent's temptation, and (2) the legacy of the One who did not.

The early chapters of Genesis tells us of origins, addressing questions about beginnings: the beginning of the universe, the beginning of life within that universe, the beginning of specifically human life on one planet in that universe, the beginning of family life, the beginning of civilizations. The story address questions small and large: questions such as why of all God's vertebrae land creatures, only the snake moves without legs or feet, questions such as why something as good and beautiful and delightful as childbirth should be so dangerous and painful and agonizing, questions such as why the good earth yields not only fruit and produce but yields plenty of thorns and weeds ... and the really big question: why do we so often get things wrong when we set out to do them right? Why is life so often out of sync? If God is good, if God's creation is good, and if we are the crown of God's creation ... made in God's image and vested with responsibility to be God's agents who care for creation on His behalf ... why do we so regularly stumble, fall and get things wrong? The fall, you see, didn't happen just once. It happens again and again as you and I stumble through life. Why? Well, it seems our primordial parents were not content living with God in paradise. In spite of being the only creatures in the world created in God's image, with all the gifts, extraordinary privileges and potential that could mean, they wanted more. They wanted to be like God. We, their children, have the same problem. As is the lot of most of our children, we are plagued by our parents' issues.

It is one of the world's best-known stories. Everything in the garden was beautiful and good. Adam and Eve were forbidden only one thing. There was this tree in the center of the garden ... the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God told Adam he could eat the fruit of any tree in the garden except that one. Of course, we know what people are like ... if something is expressly forbidden, we tend to neurotically focus on it, rather than thinking about and enjoying all the good things we are free to have or do. Mark Twain once said that God's mistake was not making the *serpent* forbidden ... for then Adam would have eaten IT! That would have taken care of things from the get-go! By the way, I want you to note ... when did God give this instruction? He gave it to Adam before the creation of the original Prime Rib Special ... Adam was given this instruction *before* the creation of Eve, before Eve entered the human race ... remember that; we'll come back to that in a minute.

Chapter 3 begins, "Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.' 'You will not surely die, the serpent said to the woman.]For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' " Note two things about this personification of evil, here ...or, should I say, this *reptilification* of evil. First, we are told he is the most crafty and sly of creatures, which means he's pretty slick. There's a sermon in itself here, but never try to outwit temptation; you won't win! Don't engage temptation in conversation; don't spend time entertaining its wiles. If Eve had only given a one word answer when asked that question, if she had just said, "NO", and walked away, things could have been so different! The seduction comes when we get caught up in the dialogue with evil, when we linger there, when we look for some kind of a theological ethic or rationale or excuse which will let us do what we want to do. Second, note that the Tempter lies. Jesus calls him "the father of lies." He tells lies we want to hear; why else would they be so tempting? "You will not die; you will become like God, knowing good and evil."

Who of us could resist such an offer? To be like God? Come to think of it, who of us has consistently refused such an offer? Don't we play God regularly? Don't we regularly tell God how He should manage things? No, not always vocally, but don't we do so by our actions? "This is the way I see it, this is the way I think it ought to be, this is how I want to do it, never mind what God might say. After all, He might just be trying to keep something from me, and I don't want to miss out." And aren't we often tempted to play God in our relationship to others ... controlling them, fixing them, trying to get them to fit our desires, attain our goals, serve our needs? This reminds me of the story of three patients at a mental hospital who were having a discussion.

The first insisted he was Napoleon Bonaparte. The second asked how he knew he was Napoleon Bonaparte. The first replied, "God told me!" To which the third inmate responded, "I did not!" We laugh, but that is what is so original about this sin. It is not original sin because it is the one which made everything go wrong from that moment on. It is the sin at our origins where each of us goes wrong! This is at the root of all our sinful, destructive activity. We are trying to *be* God rather than *trusting* God ... whenever seductions draw us into thinking we know better than God, that leads us into all kinds of mischief and destruction.

Just a bit of an aside: Eve has been blamed since time immemorial for leading Adam into sin. But note how verse 6 reads: *"When the woman saw the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it."* Adam was right there with Eve when she encountered the serpent! He was probably doing what so many husbands do, standing around quietly and allowing the wife to carry on all the social conversations. Now remember, Eve was not present when God told Adam not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. So, all she knows is what Adam must have told her. Yet now, when the serpent tempts Eve, Adam does not speak up, even though he's right there. But that's not all! He remains silent and then watches Eve as she takes the forbidden fruit and eats it. Remember God told him he would die if he ate the forbidden fruit. It is only after Adam sees Eve is still alive that he takes a bite for himself! What a guy! Instead of protecting and loving and keeping his wife, Adam uses her as a guinea pig, a food tester to test God's command. So, Adam was more than just a secondary accessory to the crime; if anything, his guilt is greater. When God later confronts Adam about this, Adam compounds his guilt by again doing what so many husbands do ... he tries to put the blame on his wife! See verse 12. Adam blames Eve, and Eve blames the serpent, and the serpent didn't have a leg to stand on! Seriously, though, I want to note just Who it is that Adam tries to blame for his transgression. It really isn't Eve. He blames *God*. He says to God, "The woman *You put here with me* ... she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it." In other words, "So, God, it's YOUR fault. You put this Prime Rib special on my plate!" No! Our sin is not God's fault. He has given us the divine capacity and gracious privilege to make real and free choices; we are given the rights and the responsibilities of freedom. No, Adam, we aren't to blame God for *our* actions.

The Tempter's lie always plays to our desire to be more than we were created to be, to have more than we were created to have. Adam and Eve wanted more: they wanted to be like God and know for themselves good and evil. So, they reached out, took the fruit, and got their wish. Suddenly, they knew good and evil. But there was something the serpent had failed to tell them. They would only know good and evil, but they would *not* know how to master it. Only God can do that, and we have to trust Him with that knowledge. They would learn first hand that what initially appears good can, in fact, be evil, and what at first appears evil, can ultimately be good. There is the heart of evil: it offers us a lie for the truth and portrays the truth as a lie, and we become lost in the quandary of choices. Before they stumbled, they were in the bliss of ignorance; now they know. They now have moral awareness, which is a burden their children will bear in each generation. Of all of God's creatures, only we bear this burden of moral awareness. Their choice not only so burdened them and the generations that have followed, it also unleashed evil in a world created good. And it got them expelled from Paradise. Try as they might, they could and would not find their way back to the Garden on their own.

There is a second garden of note in Scripture. It was here in the first garden, here in Eden, where humanity first cried out, *"Not Your will, but my will be done."* The second garden is Gethsemane, where a lonely figure cries out, *"Not my will, but Thy will be done."* Later, on a hill nearby, this Man hangs on a cross. Like the original Adam, He is naked ... but He is not ashamed. In fact, He is in the process of taking care of our shame forever. He suffered on our behalf so we might be forgiven, and the curse of death may be removed. Paul put it like this: *"For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many ... just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous."* In other words, through one man, Adam, sin and death entered the world. And we are heirs of that legacy. However, through another man, Jesus, came victory over sin and death. He faced the Tempter in the wilderness and did not sin. And on the cross, He gave Himself as a sin offering for us all. We are heirs of that legacy as well. We are joint heirs, yes; but we gain the best of both legacies ... inheriting the fullness of being made in God's image, and inheriting life, forever.

During each Lenten season we commemorate the sure and certain Hope that this broken world is not God's final word, because one Man kneeled in a garden and prayed, "Not my will, but Thy will be done" and allowed Himself to be sacrificed upon a cross. And now sin and death are no longer our only inheritance; we are heirs of life, eternal and abundant. Thanks be to God for His great and gracious gift in Jesus Christ.