

Lent 1
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Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 2:15 – 17, 3:1 - 7

Psalm 32

Romans 5:12 - 19

Matthew 4:1 - 11

On listening for the voice that gives life, and resisting the voice of deceit

Lent begins in one garden and ends in another. During Lent we make a journey in time between these two gardens that has us listening to texts, which are foundational memories for our community of faith. One of the classics of our tradition is the text from Genesis, which shows how in the first garden a problem develops between the humans and God. Listening to this text means having to make some links to its larger context. And we have to recognize that it carries some baggage: a burden of distorted ideas, which go beyond what the text supports. The most serious distortion casts the woman as a temptress or troublemaker, and is used as a basis for seeing women as lesser beings than men. Some parts of the church have given this idea canonical status, sanctioning the preferential treatment of men and, for example, providing grounds for refusing to ordain women. As we seek to hear this text afresh today, it is salutary to note reversing some of the stereotypes built up here is a huge task.

This section of Genesis is a myth, which in our faith tradition establishes a framework for understanding life in the world. It tells how, in time beyond time, the first humans received life as a gift from God, who established an intentional relationship between them and the garden, where they dwelt together. In this context the humans had responsibilities and derived benefits. They were called to till and keep the garden, as a shepherd might tend a flock, and the garden sustained their life. And it was a place where permission was given and a boundary set. All the trees were available for the wellbeing and enjoyment of the humans, but one dangerous, death-dealing tree was forbidden. Knowledge of it was reserved for God.

The perfect relationship between Creator and creature changed through a seductive conversation. A “whispering voice” caused Adam and Eve to imagine a more grandiose perception of their role, and they reached out to obtain what God had withheld.

The conversation that led to this is crucial and it is worth comparing the speech of the serpent with that of God. In the broader context of Genesis, God is not characterized in any way other than through God’s speech, which is richly sown with strong verbs that have life and power. God **formed** the humans from the earth, **breathed** life into them, **planted** trees in the garden, **put** the humans in the garden, and **set the limits** for life and work. God is known by God’s actions, which are creative, transformative and life giving. Not so the crafty serpent who has no gifts to give and no acts to perform, and whose speech carries no strong verbs. It insinuates through cunning, manipulative words calculated to undermine the relationship God had established with the humans, and break down the humans’ trust. First it questions, and then it contradicts: “Did God say...?” it asks. “You shall not die...! It asserts.

In this deceitful conversation the humans are led to believe God's speech in the garden is doubtful and negotiable: that it contains options outside those voiced by God. In falling for this the humans became victims of a death worse than dying. They exchanged their original gifts of innocence and life for a fractured God relationship, and an existence distorted by failure, shame and fear.

We do not need to be told there is a problem between humans and God. Genesis says it came about because humans were unable to resist the seductive conversation of the serpent and turned away from the one who gave them life. In the old language this is what sin is, and we sometimes call this Original sin. What this refers to is not particular moral slip-ups but choosing an orientation away from God. This fundamental resistance to God's good intentions is seen as the source of all that distorts human innocence and God's gifts of grace.

As the community of faith lives its life in the world it cannot help but listen to many conversations. But within those conversations it is called to listen for the creative voice that seeks to bring transformation and life. This means the community of faith will seek to engage in deep listening. It will engage in times of introspection, in order to learn the nuances of the creative, life-giving language and give it priority. And from this perspective it will learn to understand and resist the counter voices of death that cause it to forfeit the gift of life, through taking on board a false view of reality.

This is no small exercise. The deceitful and manipulative language of the snake is convincing, and it is all around us, seeking to undermine trust between God and humans. And is capable of using the words of faith to achieve its ends.

On the first Sunday in Lent, we place alongside Genesis the story of Jesus' lonely and painful resistance of Satan. Satan is not the same as the snake, but the goals of the two are the same: to distract the faithful from their vocation as people of God. In Jesus we see one who, like Israel before him, walked the desert way where his ultimate loyalties were put to the test. Using the scriptures as his support he resisted Satan's enticement to live for himself by choosing to supply his own bread rather than rely as Israel did on the Manna given by God. He showed he accepted who God is and did not put God to the test, and he refused to forsake living under God's sovereignty in exchange for all worldly power. Unlike Adam and Eve, Jesus chose to continue to live in the grace that gave him life, and demonstrated he knew what it meant to have been named a beloved Son of God.

We know how hard it is to remain focussed on being people of God. We struggle with the enticement to turn away and live according to self-interest. Jesus in the desert is a sign God has not left us to our own devices. In raising up Jesus God has acted creatively to show us one who, though tempted as we are, attended to the conversation with God and conquered temptation. In him the failures of the past are redeemed, and a new possibility has been opened for us: one that is grounded in life, not death. There is a power to save at work in the world. It has sought us out in one of us whose sole purpose was and is to win us back to life. Ironically it is the Cross, a new tree of life in the garden of Earth, that indicates where that power is to be found. As we go forward to Easter, and wrestle with the texts of Lent, let us resolve to attend to the conversation that gives life, and be ready to resist the death dealing voices of

deceit. May this be our Lenten discipline: to the Glory of God. Amen.