

Sermon (3/5/17, Genesis 2: 15-17; 3: 1-7):

There was something wonderful about those early toddler days when it came time for my children's baths. It was exhausting for us but our children seemed to love it. As heavy diapers were peeled away, tiny shoes and socks removed, onesies unsnapped and pulled up and over the head, a squeal of delight was let loose as they raced down the hallway, their tiny bare feet slapping against the hard floor. That moment of unabashed nakedness was pure joy. They would race from room to room full of giggles. It was hard not to get caught up in the delight. Pure innocence. Not a stitch of shame or self-conscious fear. They were free from the encumbrance of clothing and heavy wet diapers that irritated the skin and caused rashes. Free to feel the wind brush against their bodies as they ran. Free to just plain be silly.

Within a year or so, such innocence is usually gone, replaced with caution and hesitation. There is no more delighted running from room to room. There is no more freedom to be found in this stitchless state of being. Self-conscious awareness creeps in – doors are kept closed, towels are used to cover up, the giggles of bath time grow ever more silent.

It's a small blip over the course of our life-times. A scant few months, maybe, that few of us can even remember.

During my High School and early College years, streaking was a thing. During football games, at various events, in Dormitory courtyards, and even during a presentation at the Academy Awards gasps and cheers would suddenly break out as someone, unhindered by clothing, would race by. Where they found the nerve to make such a revealing appearance, I'll never know but they did and it happened with a fair amount of frequency.

Thinking back, I wonder if the glee of those moments was the result of a fond though vague recollection of toddler-days? I wonder if all that laughter and cheering in response to a brave streaker found its roots in a longing to experience again an innocence we only slightly tasted in our early days of life?

The creation stories that begin the book of Genesis, offer us a foundational memory of our life with God and each other. It is one of the most important memories we have in helping us to understand our own

story.

In today's version of the creation story, we find God creating Adam while little else yet existed. Once Adam is formed from the dust of the ground and God breathes into Adam's nostrils, giving him life, only then does God proceed to create the garden. Trees are planted bearing good fruit for eating, rivers are set in motion to water the garden, the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil are set in the midst of the garden. It's almost as if the garden was created with Adam in mind.

Placing Adam in the garden, God then provides Adam with a vocation to till and keep the garden. Paradise, as we sometimes call it, is established with a sense of responsibility. Adam has a job to do. The garden needs him. The garden's life requires that Adam take this responsibility of tilling and keeping seriously. In return, the garden will provide food.

Then God tells Adam that anything in the garden is fair game. He may eat from any tree he desires with one exception – the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Notice Adam is even permitted to eat from the Tree of Life! Only the tree of knowledge is prohibited.

Life in the garden has limits, small though they are. Life with God has parameters that must be observed. Life with each other has boundaries that must be dutifully observed if life is to be lived to its fullest. Boundaries and limits are a part of Eden.

All is well and good. The parameters God has set are observed and trusted and not questioned. Humanity has no doubt that these boundaries are for their own well-being. God then creates the animals and Adam names them. Eventually, God creates a partner for Adam...a woman whom we have come to know as Eve. A partner to share life with in the garden. Life is good. There is a certain innocence and freedom in the garden – there is no fear or shame between God and these humans and between Adam and Eve. Just the happy slapping of bare feet against the hard ground of the garden. They are naked and there is no self-conscious worry they are not good enough, beautiful enough, gifted enough, perfect enough before God and each other. There is no fear of the other. This is paradise. Adam and Eve have a vocation and responsibility to care for the

garden. The garden has a responsibility to care for Adam and Eve. There is trust, mutual care, freedom to discover what it truly means to be God's people.

While God acts, makes, and creates paradise, in enters the serpent. The serpent cannot create - he cannot form the trees, or the fruit, or the animals, or the rivers. All he has is words but, oh, what he does with those words.

It's a good reminder of the power words have. Words can bless when used well. They can teach, encourage, strengthen, comfort, energize, even create a world view that evokes excitement and a desire to build. Words can also tear down, manipulate, crush, burden, stress, dig deep wounds, inflate anxiety, and deflate dreams.

The serpent is an expert at the latter. The serpent's words introduce doubt, suspicion, and fear into the lives of Adam and Eve.

'Did not God say you can eat from any tree in the garden so why not this one?' Like the Evil One in the desert, tempting Jesus, the serpent is shrewd, manipulating even God's words in the hope to lead astray.

The Woman pushes back...her innocence and trust in God is still intact. 'Yes, we can eat anything in the garden except this one tree, the tree of knowledge, or else it will kill us.'

The serpent introduces doubt that God has their best interests in mind.

"God is simply power hungry." The serpent tells them. "God doesn't like competition. To eat of this tree means that you will be just like God."

The first seed of doubt is planted not unlike the tiny seeds that are often planted in us. Something said to us is inflated, twisted, blown out of proportion by the serpent's whisper and, suddenly, we are imagining horrible things that the person who said them never intended.

Jesus challenges us to live dangerously for the sake of grace as Jesus did for us. To risk grace, to risk care, to risk acceptance, to risk love. His words and demands are challenging, even a little scary. Again, the serpent whispers, causing us to wonder if Jesus really has our best interests in mind. Maybe it's time to give God a little competition; time to show God

who has the real voice of wisdom in this world!

The fruit is eaten and fear is born. Fear of the other as leaves are weaved into garments. Fear of God as Adam and Eve run for cover as soon as they hear God's footsteps. Fear that runs and hides and points and blames and complains.

“She made me eat it! Why did you ever make her?”

“The serpent made me eat it! Why did you put such a degusting creature in the garden?”

Humility, innocence, confidence, and trust are gone and all we are left with is longing. A longing for a more innocent time. A longing for the sound of bare feet running from room to room, delighting in the joy of shameless nakedness. This is where we begin Lent – with a longing to trust God as Adam, Eve, and even we once did. To love God fully again, recognizing that only this kind of love has the power to cast out fear.

To God alone be all the glory. Amen.