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Lent Series 2012: *Stunning Sins and Vast Forgivenesses*
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The Fall of Adam and Eve: Genesis 3:1-24

PRAYER OF THE DAY (Lent 1)

P Lord God, our strength, the battle of good and evil rages within and around us, and our ancient foe tempts us with his deceits and empty promises. Keep us steadfast in your Word and, when we fall, raise us again and restore us through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

HOLY SCRIPTURE Genesis 3:1-24, KJV

¹Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? ²And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: ³But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. ⁴And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: ⁵For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. ⁶And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. ⁷And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons. ⁸And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden. ⁹And the LORD God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou? ¹⁰And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself. ¹¹And he said, Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat? ¹²And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. ¹³And the LORD God said unto the woman, What is this that thou hast done? And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat. ¹⁴And the LORD God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life: ¹⁵And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel. ¹⁶Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. ¹⁷And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I

commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; ¹⁸Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; ¹⁹In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. ²⁰And Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living. ²¹Unto Adam also and to his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins, and clothed them. ²²And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: ²³Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. ²⁴So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.

HYMN, LBW305

I Lay My Sins on Jesus

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text refers to what I take to be the cruelest cut flung by Satan that day -- his deception about wisdom in our world:

⁶And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired *to make one wise*, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. (Genesis 3:6, KJV)

What Adam and Eve did was not wise, but rather the abandonment of wisdom. The theme of this sermon, then, can be quickly stated: the true path of wisdom for us is to cling to God's Word.

Council President Thomas Wicks happened recently to send me a line from Luther he found very moving. It is a positive statement about God's Word:

...when we seriously ponder the Word, hear it, and put it to use, such is its power that it never departs without fruit. It always awakens new understanding, new pleasure, and a new spirit of devotion, and it constantly cleanses the heart and its meditations.¹ (*Large Catechism*, The Third Commandment)

This is a lovely statement of the *benefits* of God's Word. If we cling to the Word, it will transform our hearts, give us new pleasures, and make us better people.

¹Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959). *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran church* (379). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

It so happens that in that same discussion, Luther also has a warning about the *dangers* of departing from God's Word:

Therefore you must continually keep God's Word in your heart, on your lips, and in your ears. For where the heart stands idle and the Word is not heard, the devil breaks in and does his damage before we realize it. (Ibid.)

And so now we come to the role of the devil in this evening's story. The devilish method of the serpent in the story of the Fall seems simply to be lure Adam and Eve away from God's Word.

COMPARING THE SINS OF ADAM AND EVE

Comparing the sins of Adam and Eve, the sin of Adam seems akin to that of Eve, but then hastens downward toward the sleazy kind of sin by which Adam flings Eve to the wolves in a futile attempt to save himself. And so Adam complains about Eve and about God himself:

¹²And the man said, *The woman* whom *thou* gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. (Genesis 3:12, KJV)

A charitable interpretation of Adam's first sin - his eating of the fruit of the tree - is that he loved his wife, meant to share her fate, and to go where she goes. So if she eats of the forbidden fruit, then he means to also. But the Bible doesn't actually say that he ate of the tree out of love of his wife, and even if he did, there is a lesson to be learned here: Adam loved his wife less, because he did not love the Lord more! That is, if Adam had clung to the Lord's Word forbidding that tree, then Adam would have remained an innocent and strong force in her life. He could have gently counseled her against eating of the tree. Aye, and he would have had a leg to stand on in interceding for her with the Lord, as Abraham and Moses later interceded on behalf of God's people. And if the Lord would not be persuaded away from punishing Eve, so that she had to endure some measure of rebuke, still, she would have had her husband to comfort and protect her, to cheer her up, and to walk with her until the Lord's time of chastisement had passed and all was well again. But as it is, Adam departed from the Word of the Lord too, thereby making himself a poor advocate for his wife.

THIS SIN IS A MYSTERY

It is a mystery to me why Adam and Eve fell into sin. Eve was the first to disobey the Lord, but her sin seems innocent and childlike. She did not murder anyone, she did not abuse children or steal money from poor, elderly folk. She sinned, yes, but it is the kind of sin many good-hearted people could fall into: She

was beguiled by the serpent into thinking that there was *a better way in life* than the ways of the Lord.

And herein there is a lesson for us. *Sin* does not always appear *sinful* to us. In fact, if the devil is clever enough, sin will appear quite sane to us, perhaps even virtuous. We should take quite seriously, I believe, that the devil is subtle, beguiling, and probably a lot smarter than we are.

THE DEVIL'S CLEVERNESS

Our Prayer of the Day for this week warns of the devil's power in human life, even to this very day:

Lord God, our strength, the battle of good and evil rages within and around us, and our ancient foe tempts us with his deceits and empty promises. Keep us steadfast in your Word and, when we fall, raise us again and restore us through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

That phrase there -- the battle of good and evil "rages within and around us" -- has an air of violence about it. It is akin to the saying of St. Peter -- a verse that is often read aloud in Compline, at the end of the day:

⁸Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour. (1 Peter 5:8, RSV)

This pictures the devil as ripping and roaring and slashing and clobbering us to death. But often the ways of the devil are more gentle, but just as dangerous.

Strengths and weakness are often related to one another. That is an idea I learned from Pastor David Lotz and I think it is true. An inclination to being judgmental toward others, for example, is sometimes the shadow-side of something good: a yearning for a more perfect world -- a yearning, alas, that is often disappointed and tends to frustrate us. And so it is with the devil in his attacks up on us: he has a feel for human weakness, but it is a weakness that is the shadow-side of something good: I mean, our human ability to be moved by words. We are vulnerable to words. A word from my beloved can mean more to me than money or bullets. The good Lord brings all of his creatures into being by talking about them: Let there be light, let there be fish in the sea and birds in the air, and so on. But to *one* of his creatures does the Lord actually speak: he speaks to us. And if we should take flight as in Star Trek someday and visit distant worlds and new civilizations, if we find creatures there to whom God speaks, then we will be glad to say that we have found some more humans out there in space, for that is what it means to be a "human." God not only speaks about us, but to us. We are the kinds of people who can be spoken to.

So we can be spoken to. And the devil joins right in. He speaks to us! Indeed he does. He roars sometimes, but he whispers more often. He whispers in the ear, “Surely you will not die if you depart from the Word of God.” But, then, the devil is a born liar, and we do ourselves harm in listening to him. He uses words to attack the Word, as Luther put it.

VAST FORGIVENESS

So far I have been talking about the sin of Adam and Eve. Let me speak now about their forgiveness. It is a forgiveness that extends to you and me.

The first element of their forgiveness is the simple fact that the Lord condemns the serpent, but not Adam and Eve:

...upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life.

I am glad of this. I hate to think of human beings slithering around on the ground like snakes. I like us walking upright, with our faces seeing the sunshine. I'm glad we don't have to slither.

Second, the Lord permitted Adam and Eve to *hear* the condemnation of Satan. That is crucial because it means that Adam and Eve and all their descendants to this present day need not be forlorn, as if for us and our kind there is no hope. For the wonderful thing about the condemnation of the Satan is that it speaks of a Descendant of Adam and Eve who will conquer Satan. One of their Seed will triumph over the old Enemy. And if Satan is conquered, then all is well. I am speaking of the Gospel. Adam and Eve had the Gospel preached to them. They were thrust out of the Garden, and we all live east of Eden now, in a world in which the devil still prowls around like a hungry lion seeking whom he can devour. But with the Lord's ancient condemnation of the devil, Gospel hope was created on earth. Adam and Eve were the first to hear something true and important: things are going to get better.

And the third thing about their forgiveness is that we have met this long-promised Descendent of Adam and Eve who will crush the head of the serpent. He is our Lord Jesus. In the desert he did battle with the devil, when that ancient serpent whispered all kinds of sweet nothings in his ear -- things about turning stones into bread and about the kingdoms of the world and the glory thereof. But Jesus did not follow the pattern of Adam and Eve. He refused the sweet temptations in precisely the manner Adam and Eve should have refused: by answered the devil, “But thus saith the Lord...”

Then in the Garden of Gethsemane, the devil launched a more furious attack, so dismaying and frightening Jesus with the prospect of the cross that Jesus fell into an agony of spirit. Yes, he fell into agony of spirit, yet he did not fall into sin. He defeated the devil in that Garden.

And finally, on the cross, the devil unleashed his full power and hatred, as if desperate to break Jesus while he could, before it was too late. He had broken many a man before, many a woman. In fact, he had broken them all! But not this Seed of Adam and Eve. Not our Savior Jesus. He is our great Pattern of the possibility of resisting Satan. Let us follow his pattern, keeping our eyes upon him and our ears always open to the Word of God. That is the truth path of wisdom in this world, following on behind our Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.