

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 26 February 2023
First Sunday in Lent - Year A

1st Reading: *Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7*

Psalm: 32

2nd Reading: *Romans 5:12-19*

Gospel: *Matthew 4:1-11*

Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø*

In the name of the Father, ✠ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.

Somber words, but honest words. We are children of the earth - and our life and our nourishment comes from the earth - the plants we eat draw their life from the soil, and any animals we eat also eat the plants that grow from the soil. And so it is appropriate that we often speak of our mother earth, who gave birth to us.

Even the words we use to describe ourselves connect us directly to the earth. In Hebrew, the name “Adam”, meaning “man” or “mankind”, comes from the word “adamah”, the earth. And in English, our words “human” and “humanity” come from the same word as “humus”, the soil. And in this same group of words we also find “humility” and “humble”. When we are humble, we acknowledge that we are of the soil - humus, humility, humanity. That is who we are.

And remember that when God made Adam, made humanity, he formed us from the dust of the earth, but then breathed his spirit - his breath, the wind - into that dust, and we became living souls. And when we die, God takes that breath - that spirit - back. We cease to breathe, we return to dust.

And what of our spirit, our breath, that links us to God? We are only alive because of that spirit - only alive because God breathes into us. But do we remember this? Do we remember that all that we are comes from God - formed from the earth and enlivened by his Spirit? Or do we think that we have somehow made ourselves into something great or wonderful or self-sufficient?

We have all turned away from God in one way or another - “All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way” - and any of you who are fans of Handel’s *Messiah* will know what comes next: “and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

God has not abandoned us, even if we have abandoned God. He calls us back. Indeed, he *brings* us back, by becoming dust himself. And when he became dust, when he became human, he wasn't just pretending. he faced the same temptations we face. Indeed, he faced even greater temptations than any of us do.

When we read about the ways in which the devil tempted Jesus, can we imagine what it was really like for him? Here he was - God in human form, and yet what was he to do with his life: Heal a few sick people who would eventually all die anyway? Teach a few people about the ultimate truths of the universe, even though they would struggle to understand? And ultimately to die in an obscure and dreadful way to offer life and forgiveness to those who *had* abandoned God? Did it really make any sense?

And so the devil tempted Jesus to do something that would make his divinity mean something. Make bread out of stones if you are hungry. Prove that God will send angels for protection. Use your divine power to replace all the cruel and selfish tyrants in the world who use others for their own purposes. Make this world into the perfect place it ought to be.

And have you noticed that when Satan tempts us - when he tempted Adam and Eve and when he tempted Jesus - he doesn't actually lie to us? What he said to Eve was *technically* true. Adam and Eve didn't die immediately when they ate the fruit, although death had already *begun* to work in them when they separated themselves from God, the source of life. And it was true that they became like God in the one aspect that they now knew the difference between good and evil - but only because they had now experienced evil for themselves by giving into temptation.

And how did the devil tempt Jesus? By quoting the Bible to him, but quoting it out of context. And that should be a clear warning to us lest we ourselves pick and choose how we want to interpret the Bible for our own benefit instead of listening to what it really says.

So the temptations that we experience are often couched in such a way as to make us think that we would really be doing something good if we were to give in. That is certainly the excuse I use when I find that I have given in to temptations, even though I really do know better.

Jesus, of course, resisted all of Satan's temptations to be the sort of God and Messiah who imposes his will on others. Instead, Jesus chose to love - to give truth, life and healing to others - rather than to magnify himself.

And so, when he died on the Cross, seemingly defeated by evil, giving up his own Spirit, that Spirit came to us, to re-enliven us, to give us our true spirits, our true souls, and at the resurrection, that spirit will be re-united with the dust and ashes we had come from and returned to.

In this way God does call us back to himself, calling us to abandon our own ways, and turn back to him. And because Jesus resisted the temptations the devil offered him, we too (who have received his Spirit) are able to resist the temptations we encounter throughout our lives.

So as we follow Jesus to the Cross, we are invited to look at ourselves, to examine in what ways we *have* given into temptation, and thereby turned away from God and from each other - to be honest and see what iniquities of ours God has laid on Jesus on the Cross – so that we can repent, make amends, and truly follow Jesus, remembering that we are dust and to dust we shall return.

Amen!

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