

Cursed for Your Sake

In the name of him who for us overcame all the temptations of the devil, dear friends in Christ: Yes, and speaking of temptations of the devil, today's reading from the book of Genesis (which by now you should know functions as my theological center of gravity) recounts the story of our first parents' fall into sin. It's a fitting topic for the early Lenten season since focusing on our sin problem is what Lent is all about.

In the past when preaching on this text, I've put the emphasis on analyzing Satan's tactics: the way he twists, turns, and then ultimately denies the truth in order to deceive his victims into doubting what God really said thus causing them to go astray. I go from there to show how he is still very much at it, how his tactics haven't changed, and how he is still very busy trying to deceive the hearts of the faithful. Finally I point to how we can resist him, like Christ in today's Gospel, by standing firmly on the Word of God and saying to him in reply "*It is written ...*"

It's a worthwhile treatment of the text, but what gets short shrift in a message like that is the second part of it, namely, the Lord's response to Adam and Eve's fall into sin. It's a response that is often misunderstood. I've heard people complain that the Lord's reaction is heavy-handed, over the top, way out of proportion to the offense, and that he comes across as an outwardly angry cop on a power trip handing out traffic tickets who is secretly delighted to be inflicting the penalties of the law on those who break it. Like I said, such a view is mistaken; and I hope to demonstrate it.

So let's start there, after the first couple has succumbed to temptation and tasted of the forbidden fruit. Now they're feeling the effects of having rebelled against the Lord. It's a bad feeling. They've lost the image of God who is love, who is ever looking outward seeking the good of others, to looking inwardly seeking only the good of the self. That is the essence of sin: to love only self. And they're ashamed of it; so ashamed that they are ashamed even of their own perfectly formed bodies. Thus were born the careers of tailors, seamstresses, and everything else related to the fashion industry. It was a pretty pathetic start. And, as the story unfolds, one that proves to be entirely inadequate. You can't cover the shame of sin with fig leaves.

The first couple realizes this instantly when they hear the sound of the Lord walking in the garden in the cool of the day. That they recognize this sound is significant. It means they've heard it before. We are left with the impression that this is a daily occurrence, that the Lord comes down to fellowship with them around tea time each day, have a little chit chat, see how they're doing and all. It's usually the highpoint of their day; but not today. Today the sound of the Lord's approach strikes fear in their hearts. They've broken fellowship with him. They've become his enemies. So they run and hide.

But note that the Lord's approach is like usual. He's not coming like a SWAT team breaking down the door. He's gentle and friendly. And it's not like he doesn't know what has happened. It goes with being omniscient, right? He's has every reason to be angry; but he's not. When the Lord arrives at their normal rendezvous and they aren't there, he calls to them, "Where are you?" Two things to see here: first that he reaches out to them with his Word. It's the way he always operates in this world. It's the way he reaches out to you and me. Second, that he is acting as the Good Shepherd seeking to find and save the lost. This is pure grace.

When Adam replies that he hid because he was naked and afraid, the Lord gives him a chance to come clean. “Who told you that you were naked? Did you do what I told you not to do?” At this point Adam can reply, “Yes, Lord, I did. I’m sorry.” But no, he tries to justify himself: “That *woman* you gave me, she’s the guilty one, your Honor. And some of the blame is yours too for putting her here with me.” Yes, sin’s corruption runs deep; and lest we cast stones we need to recognize that Adam here is all of us.

The Lord turns his attention to Eve. “What is this that you have done?” It’s her chance to come clean. But she too passes the buck. “It’s the serpent’s fault. He deceived me.” It’s likely she’s also implying, “You should be more careful about leaving lying snakes hanging around.”

So, the Lord’s inquiry has gone from the man, to the woman, to the snake. He finds all of them guilty. We now enter into what may be called the penalty phase, which proceeds in reverse order: first the serpent, then the woman, and finally the man. Upon Satan, the serpent, God pronounces a curse – the strongest of all curses. He is cursed above everything else in all creation. He was prideful; he gets humiliation. He reached upward; he is cast downward. He sought glory; he gets shame. He strived for victory; he’ll go down in defeat – specifically he’ll go down in defeat when the One who is here called “the Seed of the woman” crushes his head. More on him later.

It’s the woman’s turn for a penalty. To her was given a tremendous blessing: the ability to bring forth children, surely one of God’s greatest gifts to womankind; to conceive and carry them in her womb, to nourish them with her own body—both before and after birth, to love and to care for them in the time of their lives they are most needy and vulnerable. To that tremendous blessing is now added the excruciating pain of labor and delivery. What should be her greatest joy, the bringing forth of new life, now includes immense suffering and sorrow. But please note that it’s immediately after promising them a serpent-conquering Savior who is “the Seed of the woman” that the Lord declares this penalty. The two are tied together. It’s through the woman’s unique capacity to bring forth new life that the Savior is to come. God’s plan of salvation depends on her and her ability – which now involves great suffering. There’s a message here: new life, salvation, they come through the suffering of someone else, someone who suffers on behalf of another. It turns out that every woman’s painful labor and delivery is a picture of the cross, God’s plan of salvation in Jesus. It’s like the Gospel written on a basic fact of human biology; written there for everyone to see and to remember.

The Lord isn’t quite done with her though. He adds, “Your desire shall be for your husband, but he shall rule over you.” The idea is this: to the man was assigned the mantle of authority and accountability. He was placed in charge. And the Lord holds him responsible. And in the time before the fall into sin, the woman was thrilled with this arrangement. She found her joy and fulfillment in following his lead. Not anymore. Now she will seek authority and autonomy for herself – that which belongs to him. But she can’t have it. “He will rule over you.” What was once the source of joy and fulfillment is now a burden she chafes under. It’s the way sin is. By nature it is in rebellion against any authority; especially authority assigned by God.

Having dealt with the Eve, the Lord lowers the boom on Adam. “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife ...” Ah yes, the source of all human misery: husbands listening to their wives. No, allow me to retract that. Once again this year I’ve given up sarcasm for Lent. The idea here is not that Adam is wrong for listening to Eve; it’s that he should have been listening to the Lord and what he said and instructing Eve to do the same. That is, he should have acted like a man and taken charge of the situation when his wife was being tempted and led astray. He failed in his duty to keep her safe and remind her of God’s Word.

Eve gets a bum rap. In the history of the church she's often the one who is blamed for the fall. The truth is that it was Adam's fault. He was in charge. And the Scriptures always call the fall "the sin of Adam".

And then the penalty: "Cursed is the ground *for your sake*." That's a better translation than saying "Cursed is the ground *because of you*." The latter suggests, "I'm applying this curse to creation and it's your fault" which is true to some extent; but the former better captures the spirit of the Lord's intent. It's this: "I'm applying this curse to creation, and as bad as it is for you, making your life one of endless struggle and toil amid painful thorns and thistles – I'm doing it for your good."

How can a curse on creation be for our good? Think about it: before the fall it's an earthly paradise. Life is easy. Man enjoys his work. The creation cooperates, even enjoys serving him. And life goes on, endless days of satisfaction and perfect contentment. If things had continued that way after the fall, what motivation would there be to repent, to turn from sin, to seek the things of God? None. So the Lord places the creation under the curse, what the Scripture elsewhere calls "subject to futility" in order to show mankind that without the Lord it's all meaningless. Everything has a shelf life. Nothing lasts or endures. Today's happiness is tomorrow's loss. You work, work, work just to stay alive; you suffer all kinds of setbacks, sorrows, and losses; and in the end you die and return to the dust from which you were taken. No matter how hard you work, no matter what you achieve, you die. You lose. You can't save yourself. If the woman's pain in childbearing is a portrait of the Gospel, then the penalty placed on the man is a portrait of the Law – the Law by which no person can be saved.

The curse the Lord places on creation for the man's sake is meant to drive him back to the Lord and giver of life, and to the one thing that does endure forever: namely, the Word of God – the Word of God that gives life and hope and salvation. The Lord curses the creation so that we will see that it's broken and long for something better, that something better we have in our collective memory. We have never experienced it; but we know that it's out there. The fact that we can imagine a perfect world in which everything good does endure tells us that it must be so. So the present curse on creation – like the Law of God that shows us our sin – is actually for our good because it brings us to repentance and to trust in the Savior.

Okay, returning to my original goal, I hope that I've demonstrated that the Lord's response to our first parents' fall is not overly heavy-handed. It is, in fact, unexpectedly gracious. But there's one more thing I'd like to point out about it. You'll note that the Lord curses Satan and he curses creation for our sakes; but the word "curse" is not applied to the man or to the woman. They suffer penalties, yes, penalties that are full of meaning and purpose; but they are not cursed by God. The point is that they should be. They sinned. They rebelled against God just like Satan did. They deserve his curse. But they don't get it. The Lord refrains from cursing them.

Why doesn't he curse them? It's because God is love. And in love, he takes the curse they (and indeed all of us) deserve on himself. I told you I'd come back to the one who is called "the Seed of the Woman." He crushes the serpent's head in his victory on the cross, but at the same time he feels the burning agony of the serpent's venomous bite. The wrath and curse of God we deserve fall on him. As we journey together through this Lenten season of self-examination and repentance may you be given the grace to reflect more thoughtfully and deeply upon the passion and death of the Lord Jesus and how in God's mercy *he* was cursed for your sake. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!