

## Sin

We often think of Lent as a time to put on our spiritual combat boots as we prepare for battle with our spiritual enemies like chocolate or red wine.

On the flip side, Lent is also that time to improve ourselves spiritually by stretching out and doing things we wouldn't ordinarily do and so make better people of ourselves.

These options are worthy things to do during these 40 days.

But neither the giving up nor the stretching out alone gets us into the heart of Lent.

The heart of Lent calls us to something much stranger, much more radical, and much more disturbing.

But in order to get there, we have to take a good look at what we are, creatures formed from the earth, and to the earth we shall return – but for the grace of God.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, but for the grace of God.

We live in America so the idea of death is not only ignored by most people, it's rude to even mention it.

We live in a youth obsessed culture where men have mid-life crises resolved by buying sports cars (although I must say my Porsche had NOTHING to do with a mid-life crisis) and menopausal women become known as cougars: on the prowl for 30-something men.

The big joke at a recent awards show in Hollywood was about how George Clooney in the movie Gravity would rather float off into space and die rather than spend another minute with a woman over 40 years old.

As I mentioned to our Ash Wednesday crowd, when Mother Imelda and I showed up dispensing ashes in Chinatown, half the folks looked at us like we were a couple of grave diggers.

In this country we Botox and plastic surgery and liposuck and Viagra ourselves into what we are convinced will be eternal youth.

No wonder vampire movies are our favorite fare.

Sure, they may be monsters, but they never die.

And yet we all know that this denial of who and what we are is just that: denial.

Lent is like a giant mirror coming down from the heavens, and all of humanity is stuck looking at ourselves, pot bellies and bunions, flabby butts and double chins: physically, emotionally and spiritually, it's who we are.

It's not a pretty sight.

With wars and quarrels just about everywhere you look, from my family to yours, from our nation to their's, taken as a whole, humanity is without a doubt in a serious pickle.

And if you think you're generally doing okay and have managed to get through this life a few notches above the rest, then listen up to the story from Genesis today.

What is the Original Sin that infects every single human being?

It's pretty shocking actually, it's quite a surprise indeed.

What is original sin?

It turns out to be judging between what is good and what is evil.

If you have ever decided what is good and what is evil, then you are infected with Original Sin.

Okay, you're thinking, this time he's actually lost his mind, not just misplaced it!

Telling right from wrong is original sin?

We decide right from wrong 100 times a day, from stopping (or not) at the red light to stealing (or not) that candy from the gas station to giving (or not) a buck or two to that bum on the street.

But as odd as it sounds, and I'm not making this up, according to the gal who wrote this part of the book of Genesis, judging right from wrong **is** original sin.

It is the ability to tell good from evil that get us the boot from the Garden of Harmony.

Don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God says, or you will die.

Of course, tell any of us "don't," and the response will be, say, oh, 10 out of 10 times, "Let's do it!"

So our first parents in the garden eat, and in the eating they get their eviction papers from the Garden of Harmony; barely 2 chapters into the first book of the Bible, and we get our walking papers.

Why?

Because when people decide what is good and what is evil, there is no harmony.

Because the judgments I make aren't just about obeying traffic lights or not being a thief or giving a bum a buck.

I also decide what's good and what's evil when it comes to how your lousy attitude is inexcusable and how this group of people are, in my judgment, a bunch of freeloaders and why we ought to go to war for these reasons that seem to make so much sense to me at the moment.

When **people** decide what is good and what is evil there is no harmony.

God's intention is that only God can define what is good and what is evil, leaving us completely dependent on God for those oh so important choices.

That's why Jesus says let the weeds and wheat grow together, and forbids us to judge each other, and insists we pour out mercy into each other's laps rather than judgment so our laps may also receive mercy.

But we are tone deaf to these commands, so when we announce our independence from God, thanking God very much for all the trouble he's gone

to, but, we've got this business of good and evil covered, well, that's the start of all our troubles, and that's our situation.

So when we talk about sin, we're not talking about a greed problem or a sex problem or an anger problem or any of these private individual sins that one person or another is afflicted with from time to time.

Lent is not about the **sins** of the world, it's about the **sin** of the world.

My friend Glenn Woo likes to call me a liberal, but the fact is for liberals, sin isn't something they want to talk about much.

For many of my liberal friends, talk about sin is old fashioned and outmoded, besides, you might hurt someone's self-esteem if you talk about sin, and heaven forbid if someone's self-esteem should take a knock!

On the other hand, my conservative friends tend to think of sin as moral failure, something that can be overcome if you just straighten up and fly right, if you just try a little harder, and exercise a little more self control.

But neither of these views gets to the reality of sin.

The reality is that sin has all of us in its grip because every waking moment we are judging what is good and what is evil and therefore every waking moment we participate in Original Sin, because by making those judgments for ourselves we say adiós to God's sole right to make those judgments, and therefore we walk away from depending on God for all things, ending up rowing our boats against the tide.

And yet, I can no more stop making judgments about what is good and what is evil than I can stop breathing: it is simply part of who I am, and who you are and who all of humanity is.

All of this sounds like pretty bad news.

And it is bad news, but only if we insist on us being the solution to the problem.

If Lent is only a time to strengthen our spiritual muscles, we really are wasting our time.

At the heart of Lent is this truth: we can't save ourselves.

When we look in the collective mirror, straight and unblinking, we realize that despite all efforts to the contrary, we are all going to die.

We realize that we are all steeped in sin, it's the air we breathe and the water we drink.

We can't fix it.

And if we can face those facts, we can stop sucking in our spiritual gut and relax, we can exhale.

There is relief in just getting honest.

A doctor who has a vicious form of cancer starts building his own wooden coffin and his family and friends are outraged, telling him he's giving up on life.

But he tells them they have it quite wrong:

"It gives me a whole new perspective on really living life, because how can I get mad at a guy driving too slow when I've just come from sanding my own coffin?"

A high school student is interviewed about the 8 months he spent living on the streets, homeless, and of his deep fear of telling anyone the truth of what was happening; until finally he does face the truth and feels the overwhelming relief that comes with facing facts.

Lent is all about facing facts.

It's the season to scrape away at our own arrogant insistence that with just a little more self-help or prayer or beauty cream or money or promotion or political success or, or, or, we can finally earn our own salvation.

The truth is, we can't.

And that's what Paul is telling us today: into our hopeless stuckness, God has rescued us, and not because we are endearing or deserving, but because God is gracious, because God is good, because God has never given up on us.

Psychologists long ago figured out that when people feel frightened or vulnerable, they often project to others anger and certainty, and it is only after coming to grips with the underlying fear and vulnerability, only after facing once again the causes of that fear or vulnerability, that the true nature of the person can safely emerge, a person who is no longer angry, no longer sure of everything, but a person at peace with himself and with others.

Lent gives us all that chance to face who we are, and by the grace of God, to let go and let God.

“So Lent isn’t about punishing ourselves for being human – the practice of Lent is about peeling away layers of insulation and anesthesia which keeps us from the truth of God’s promises.

We let go of all the pretenses and destructive independence from God.

We let go of defending ourselves.

Then, like the prodigal son, we see God running with abandon to welcome us home.” Nadia B. Weber.

In the desert with the Tempter, Jesus waits patiently for food.

Even though he is famished, he says “no” to self-help, “no” to self-reliance; “no” to the independence he must declare from God if he chooses to turn stones into bread.

He waits patiently for God’s abundance, trusting his needs will be met, in God’s own time.

He says “no” to power and wealth, and by saying “no” he teaches us that God’s kingdom of self-giving love cannot be bought with money or imposed at the end of a gun.

The good as God defines it is not complicated, nor is it easy.

It means rejecting idols of every kind: whether the idol is eternal youth or financial security; whether it is worshipping the sun in the sky or military might.

“Worship” and “trust,” when it comes to God, mean exactly the same thing.

And God the creator insists that we trust only him.

That's a scary thing.

If we trust God, what will happen to us?

After all, look what happens to Jesus!

And that is the other side of today's readings.

It is by enduring suffering, patiently, that we develop the ability to become who we are meant to be.

It is by going to those dark places in our lives and in this world that we are able finally to see the bright light of God.

These 40 days of Lent, which mirror the 40 days of Jesus in the desert, are a way for us to go to those places we would rather not go, to confront the demons we know are lurking, but whom we have been afraid to face, to struggle with, and finally surrender, our need to say what is good and what is evil, to leave those judgments to God.

This first Sunday of Lent, to really hear the Good as God intends it, just look to Jesus: to his work, to his words, to his life, and to his death.

And there is this: it is the highest irony that of the temptations made to Jesus, insisting he turn stone into bread, inciting him to throw himself off the temple roof and offering him lordship over all the world's kingdoms, that by waiting on God, Jesus, in the end, receives everything the devil offers, and more: he himself becomes the bread of life, he himself becomes the new temple of God, and Jesus, having been raised from the dead, is indeed the king of the universe.

What we cannot do for ourselves, God does for us in Jesus, or as Jesus might say: "You cannot and you dare not, but I could and I dared."

C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*.

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