

**First Sunday in Lent
February 17, AD 2002
"Overcome by a Tree"
Genesis 2:7-9,15-17; 3:1-7**

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Genesis 2:7 the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. **8** Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. **9** And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground-- trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil....

Genesis 2:15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. **16** And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; **17** but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die..."

Genesis 3:1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" **2** The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, **3** but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" **4** "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. **5** "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." **6** When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. **7** Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

We've entered the season of Lent once again. For many of us, it's a favorite time of the church year. There's much to enjoy about Lent: the beautiful purple paraments, the familiar Lenten hymns, the love of

Christ shining gloriously through the Passion history readings. I especially look forward to hearing one phrase in the communion liturgy during Lent. It's called the Proper Preface for Lent. It's a prayer before communion in which we give thanks to Jesus "who brought the gift of salvation to all people by his death on the tree of the cross, so that the devil, who overcame us by a tree would in turn by a tree be overcome." I think it's the symmetry of that statement that I like: "that the devil, who overcame us by a tree would in turn by a tree be overcome." Satan ruined God's Creation by means of a tree, but Jesus destroyed the devil's work by means of another tree. Satan got a good dose of his own medicine. This morning, on the first Sunday of another Lenten season, our Old Testament lesson from Genesis 2 and 3 explains why the great suffering and, ultimately, the death of Jesus Christ were necessary. It was because, in the words of our liturgy, we had been **Overcome by a Tree**. This morning we see 1] Adam and Eve overcome by a tree, 2] we see ourselves overcome by that same tree, but then 3] we thankfully also see Satan overcome by a tree.

1. Adam and Eve were (overcome by a tree)

The opening verses of the Bible are a record of God's goodness and mercy to our first parents. In fact, it's all but impossible to overstate God's goodness to the first humans. Adam and Eve owed their very existence to God. By a special act of creation, God formed Adam from the dust of the ground. Then God animated the man he had created by breathing the breath of life into his nostrils. Eve, this same chapter of Genesis tells us, was created by God from one of Adam's ribs. The creation of Eve, the Bible says, was God's response to Adam's need for companionship. So they're alive now and they have each other. They complement each other. She is a helper suitable for him.

But God's got more goodness in store for them. God plants a garden called Eden. The name "Eden" means pleasure. The Greek translation of the Old Testament calls it Paradise. It's beautiful. It's flawless. It's filled with trees that are pleasing to the eye and good for food. And, because God knows how dull and dissatisfying life would be without meaningful work, he assigns Adam to work the garden and take care of it. In his generosity, God invites Adam and Eve to eat of any tree in the garden. They will not hunger. They will not lack for variety in their diet. They will literally taste the goodness of God. "Help yourself," God says. There's only one prohibition. *"You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it, you will surely die."*

This is the point at which some people would suggest that maybe God

isn't all good. Why place any tree-even if it's only one tree-off limits? And why such a harsh penalty for trespassing at this tree? If God were really good, some people suggest, he wouldn't have prohibited Adam and Eve from eating from any of the trees. Especially in view of God's foreknowledge of the Fall, wasn't God laying a trap for Adam and Eve? Wasn't it the equivalent of setting a fresh-baked apple pie on the kitchen table to cool and then legislating death for anyone who steals a piece? Could it be God and not Satan who's the real tempter here?

Not at all! The tree of the knowledge of good and evil (and God's command not to eat from it) was actually another sign of God's goodness. If life without meaningful work is dull and dissatisfying, life without a meaningful way of worshipping the Creator God would be even more dull and dissatisfying. If Adam and Eve had been pre-programmed to do everything according to God's will without thinking, the fact that they did what they'd been programmed to do could hardly be a source of pleasure to God. Instead, God gave Adam and Eve the freedom of choice. He enabled them to decide whether to obey or to disobey him. By choosing not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they could make a conscious decision to worship and glorify the God who brought them into existence and gave them so many blessings. And since they'd been created in the image of God, they certainly had the wherewithal to do his will.

But we know that's not what Eve and Adam chose to do. They were tempted by the Tempter. Still smarting from his failed rebellion against God, Satan was determined to ruin what God had created. In the guise of serpent he worked his cunning scheme on Eve. He sowed doubt about God's word. "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" He sowed doubt about God's goodness. ("God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.") What God had said so emphatically ("When you eat of it you will surely die."), Satan contradicted just as emphatically: "You will not surely die." And as Eve's gaze rested on the fruit, it seemed so tempting. Whom to believe? Whom to trust? It was a triple threat: Pleasing to look at, good for food, and desirable-so the serpent said-for gaining wisdom. So she exercised her freedom of choice and plucked the fruit and ate it. And Adam was there with her, so she gave some fruit to Adam and he ate it, too.

And in that instant they were overcome. Satan had been right. Their eyes were opened, but not in the way they imagined. They did know good and evil now. They had once been good and now they were evil. Their innocence was lost and in a feeble attempt at covering their

shame, they made loincloths out of fig leaves. But that wouldn't cover them from God's anger. Sin was in the world now, and it instantly ushered in fear and frustration and pain and sorrow and death. Paradise was lost.

We hear this account not like disinterested observers. This isn't like a two paragraph, side column newspaper report of an accident that happened far away to someone we don't know. This is our story. This affects us. This is how our world got to be the way it is. This is how we got to be the way we are. In a very real sense, we were overcome by that same tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

2. We were (overcome by the tree)

Last week when President Bush attended the Winter Olympics, the leader of the Mormon church gave him a copy of his genealogy, which reportedly showed that Mr. Bush is distantly related to two other U.S. presidents, George Washington and Richard Nixon. Genealogies can be interesting. Our genealogy might reveal that we're descended from, or distantly related to, someone famous. Or, we might find that we're descended from, or distantly related to, someone who's infamous. The fact is that if each of us traced our genealogy back to the very beginning, we'd find that we're descended from the same two people, Adam and Eve.

That's important genealogical information because it reveals something about our spiritual pedigree. It was through our ancestor, Adam, that sin entered the world. And everyone descended from Adam has inherited from Adam the guilt of sin and the inclination toward sin. At the moment of our conception we were already sinners in God's sight, "full of evil lusts and inclinations" and "unable by nature to have true fear of God or true faith in God." The Confessions of the Lutheran Church call this original sin an "inborn sickness" and "hereditary sin" that is "truly sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God." Paul said it this way in our epistle lesson this morning: **"Through the disobedience of the one man, many were made sinners."** (Rom. 5:19)

Some people howl in protest at this teaching of original sin. "I wasn't anywhere near Eden! Eve never consulted me before she ate that fruit!" "How could I be tarred with the same brush that Adam is?" But let's lay aside the question of fairness for a moment and take a look at our lives. Is there pain in childbirth? Does our work ever become painful toil? That's evidence that we're living under the curse of sin. But the best evidence that we're the spiritual heirs of Adam's

condemnation is that we're going to die one day. We might not like to think about it, but we'd be fools to deny it. We age. We get sick. It's unavoidable, because in Adam we were all overcome by a tree. **"Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned."** (Rom. 5:12) We were there at Eden.

The message of this Lenten season, though, is that God was not content to leave us there in the shattering, damning aftermath of the rebellion there at the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In wondrous love, he promised and sent a Savior. Through the work of this Savior, Jesus, it would be Satan who was finally overcome by a tree.

3. Satan was (overcome by a tree)

The tree by which Satan was overcome was not a tree growing in Eden, but a much uglier tree, the tree of the cross. The New Testament in about five places refers to the cross of Jesus as a tree, no doubt because it was made from a tree. The apostle Paul spoke that way. So did Peter. It was Peter who wrote about Jesus, **"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed."** (1 Peter 2:24) It was with our sins, not his own, that Jesus went to the cross. He was determined, for the joy set before him, to endure the cross, to scorn its shame. He went resolutely to that tree in order to cover our guilt with his innocence, and to win the forgiveness which he would apply to our sin-sick souls. Satan may actually have thought he won a great victory at the cross. After all, he seemed to be enjoying a string of successes. He had been at work in Judas to betray Jesus and at work in Peter to deny Jesus. He had been up late, working in the Jewish leaders to conspire to have Jesus crucified, and working in Pontius Pilate to sign off on the crucifixion, though Pilate knew that Jesus had done nothing worthy of death. The one who called himself the life of the world was now slumped in death. The one who called himself the light of the world was laid to rest in a dark tomb. But any rejoicing Satan might have done was premature. On Easter morning Jesus took up again the life he had laid down for us. He was victorious over sin and death and, yes, over Satan. At Calvary and at the garden tomb, the devil got a deadly dose of his own medicine, He was overcome by a tree. I'm sure that some people don't understand our love of the season of Lent. "All this talk of sin and suffering and death. It's too morbid! How about something more upbeat, more positive?" But when we've come to the realization of our sinfulness and the unending punishment our sins deserve, there's

nothing more positive, nothing more thrilling, than retracing the events that resulted in Jesus, our Savior, overcoming by the tree of the cross the one who overcame us at the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. For that "it is truly good and right that we should at all times in all places give you thanks, O Lord, holy Father."

Amen.