

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the First Sunday in Lent

**Year A
RCL**



Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
Matthew 4:1-11
Psalm 32

The Collect

The Collect

Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing

good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Psalm 32

Beati quorum

- 1 Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, *
and whose sin is put away!
- 2 Happy are they to whom the LORD imputes no guilt, *
and in whose spirit there is no guile!
- 3 While I held my tongue, my bones withered away, *
because of my groaning all day long.
- 4 For your hand was heavy upon me day and night; *
my moisture was dried up as in the heat of summer.
- 5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you, *
and did not conceal my guilt.
- 6 I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD."
*
Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin.
- 7 Therefore all the faithful will make their prayers to
you in time of trouble; *
when the great waters overflow, they shall not reach
them.
- 8 You are my hiding-place;
you preserve me from trouble; *
you surround me with shouts of deliverance.
- 9 "I will instruct you and teach you in the way that you

should go; *

I will guide you with my eye.

10 Do not be like horse or mule, which have no understanding; *

who must be fitted with bit and bridle,
or else they will not stay near you."

11 Great are the tribulations of the wicked; *

but mercy embraces those who trust in the LORD.

12 Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in the LORD; *
shout for joy, all who are true of heart.

Matthew 4:1-11

Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written,

‘One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth
of God.’”

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,’
and ‘On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the

Lord your God to the test.’”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’”

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

SERMON

And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

Think about that for a minute, willya? “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat...” God told Adam that he is not to imagine himself to be master of good and evil but Satan tempted Adam and all of us to this very day by saying:

But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

Only God can know good and evil. Pretending otherwise is to view yourself as God's equal. If in my time with you I teach anything it is that you must turn from

your celebration of your own righteousness and in place of it embrace the submission to God which is the hallmark of a true Christian. The sin we confess this Sunday is that we have eaten of the forbidden fruit, we have failed to confess our wrong-doing, and have even aligned ourselves with secular power to confirm our pride in our sin. Vietnamese Zen master Nhat Hanh once said,

At the same time, these men and women do not hesitate to align themselves with those in power in order to strengthen the positions of their church or community. They believe that political power is needed for the well-being of their church or community... Then they look at this self as absolute truth and dismiss all other spiritual traditions as false. This is a very dangerous attitude; it always leads to conflicts and war. Its nature is intolerance.

We are certain that our way is the only way, and all

other ways are false. Assuming that those of other ways don't embrace our certainty (and they won't) we then align ourselves with those in power to bolster our position. We invent good reasons to do bad things. This sort of shenanigans always leads to conflicts and war for its nature is intolerance. What does that look like? Let's review history.

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which resulted in the forced removal and incarceration of 120,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans. They were charged with no crime. The cause of their imprisonment was their ancestry. George Takei, who played Sulu on Star trek, was one of those 120,000:

Early one morning, a few weeks after his fifth birthday, George Takei's parents woke him. They were hurried, packing quickly, and Takei gazed out the window.

He saw two soldiers marching up his East Los Angeles driveway, carrying rifles with shiny bayonets. The soldiers stomped up the front porch and banged on the door until Takei's father answered, and the family was ordered out of their home at gunpoint.

Takei's mother was last to leave.

“When she came out, she had our baby sister in one arm and a huge, heavy-looking duffel bag in the other, and tears were streaming down her face,” Takei said Friday, more than seven decades later.

“And that terror,” he said, “is seared into my memory.”

We saw this as an good thing to do since everyone knew that Japanese were not trustworthy and all of them sought our defeat. We found a good reason to do a bad thing. We were sure we were doing the right thing at the time because protecting our people from danger, real or imagined, is the right thing to do. Right? I find it

interesting that we did not intern Germans or Italians. Only Japanese. We rationalized away the racism behind our actions by telling ourselves that we were doing something good. The road to hell, as we all know, is paved with good intentions.

M.S. St. Louis was a German ocean liner. She set sail from Hamburg to Cuba on May 13, 1939 carrying 937 passengers, most of them Jewish refugees seeking asylum from Nazi persecution. Her captain was a non-Jewish German. When Cuba and Canada refused them entry, we also turned her away. We said it was because we feared that there might be a German spy on board. The refugees were finally accepted in various European countries, but historians have estimated that approximately a quarter of them died in death camps during World War II. Again we found a good reason to do a

bad thing.¹

Our souls are too damaged to digest so rich a meal as the knowledge of good and evil, and God forbade it. Of course, we can't comfortably confess to such a failure, so we resort to rationalizations for rationalizations allow us to view ourselves and those like us as the righteous white hat guys.

So, how are we to conduct ourselves if we are not to imagine that we are the judges of good and evil? My go-to passage has always been Micah 6:8

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

It's hard to argue with this prescription. If you act justly and love mercy, if you walk humbly with your God, confessing that a meal of good and evil is too rich

¹ Wikipedia

for you, it seems to me impossible to rationalize approval of actions such as those which occurred on December 29, 1890, near Wounded Knee Creek on the Lakota Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

On December 28, a detachment of the U.S. 7th Cavalry Regiment intercepted Spotted Elk's band of Miniconjou Lakota and 38 Hunkpapa Lakota and escorted them 5 miles westward to Wounded Knee Creek, where they made camp. The remainder of the 7th Cavalry Regiment arrived and surrounded the encampment. The regiment was supported by a battery of four Hotchkiss mountain guns.

On the morning of December 29, the troops went into the camp to disarm the Lakota. One version of events claims that during the process of disarming the Lakota, a deaf tribesman named Black Coyote was reluctant to give up his rifle, claiming he had paid a lot for it. A

scuffle over the rifle ensued, causing several Lakota to draw their weapons and open fire on the cavalry regiment. The situation quickly devolved as both sides began firing indiscriminately. By the time it was over, more than 150 men, women, and children of the Lakota had been killed and 51 were wounded including 47 women and children, some of whom died later). Twenty-five soldiers also died, and 39 were wounded. At least twenty soldiers were awarded the Medal of Honor for this fiasco.² We don't like to acknowledge our sin. We much prefer to grant a mantle of righteousness to ourselves. Twenty Medal of Honor recipients for an action which killed 150 men, women and children?

More recently, on January 29, a raid in Yemen cost the life of one of our brave soldiers, but also the lives of many civilians. Look at our announcement insert. See

² Wikipedia

the little girl? Her name was “Nora” and she was an American citizen, born in New Mexico to a family which chose to align itself with Al-Qaeda. She was 8 years old, visiting her mother, when she was shot in the neck and killed in that same raid.³

I know all the rationalizations about why the raid was necessary. I just want you to see the face behind the bland phrase, “civilian casualties”. Nora's family thought they were doing the right thing by throwing in with Al-Qaeda. We thought we were doing the right thing to attack them. Maybe from Nora's pretty little face we can understand why God instructed us not to eat of the knowledge of good and evil. Not all things we can eat may be safely digested. This is one of those things.

Lent is when we face up to our sins. Raising yourself

3 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/01/yemen-strike-eight-year-old-american-girl-killed-al-awlaki>

up to be the judge of good and evil is one of those sins. You can easily convince yourself that the raid was necessary, and that civilian casualties were never planned, but were the unavoidable result of the nature of the raid, but I want you to face up to the reality of just who those unintended victims were. The road to hell is paved with good intentions. Unless we are prepared to look into the eyes of those we harm, unless we are willing to release the false certainties we allow to guide us, and confess our wrong-doing, we cannot follow Christ.

And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

AMEN

BENEDICTION

J.K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter books, wrote, “Those who choose not to empathize enable real monsters. For without ever committing an act of outright evil ourselves, we collude with it, through our own apathy.” To empathize is to feel another's pain as our own. When we rest comfortably on our good intentions, choosing not to feel the pain of those we hurt, we have paved the road to hell. Our Call to Worship reminded us of our duty during Lent:

Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and did not conceal my guilt.
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.”
Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin.

Until we meet again,

The Lord bless you and keep you;

the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be
gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give
you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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