

A Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent 2014
St. James' Mt. Airy
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You have, no doubt, noticed that the church looks a little different. Your penance for having built such a wonderful, flexible space for worship is that worship leaders are going to want to take advantage of that flexibility. And this arrangement, which is similar to the way some Christian Churches would have been set up when the church moved out of worshipping into people's homes into places built just for the assembly, seemed to me to be very fitting for the season of Lent. We can see one another as we pray and meditate, and the movement of the service from Word to Table is physically enacted.

I'm trying another practice which traditionally goes with this arrangement of the sanctuary, and that is preaching from a chair instead of a pulpit. It was such an important part of the early tradition of the church, that we named our bishops' churches after the chair itself. "Cathedral Church" means church with a chair.

And when we do make the move from this side to that, from Word to Table, we will be celebrating the Eucharist with a new prayer, one not in the Prayer Book. It too, is, I think, particularly suited to Lent in the way that it talks about the unimaginable reach of God's forgiveness. Lots of changes, but perhaps you can think of them as practice during this time of transition, or as another practice of penitence until the usual order of things is restored at Easter.

And there's also all this purple and all this penitence to let us know that Lent has arrived, and that we have embarked on the forty days of fasting, prayer and penitence that gets us in shape for the great fifty-day feast of Easter.

Are any of you sufficiently suspicious of authority to have actually counted the days between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday? It's March 5 to April 19 this year, and if you are trying to work it out on your fingers right now, I've counted it out for you: It actually comes out to forty-seven days. It's not a trick to get you to fast longer. The fact of the matter is that the Church never fasts on Sundays. The Lord's Day is always a feast day, even during Lent, so don't be shocked if you find nice things on the table at Coffee Hour after the service.

Sundays during Lent are different from other Sundays though. We don't say the "A" word, and the whole service takes on a more somber tone. And we read passages from our Bible that have to do with temptation and sin, things we are largely content to experience without comment for the rest of the year.

The gospel story of Jesus, flung into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit to fast, and pray, and resist the temptations of power and glory we read on the first Sunday of Lent every year, but the more problematic story of the temptation of Adam and Eve in the garden we get only one year in three.

No one comes off very well in this story, do they? The humans don't seem to think for themselves at all, and neither God nor the serpent is offering enough information to make a good decision. "The day you eat the fruit you will die," says God, but it turns out God means "you will become subject to death, and die someday, not necessarily today," which makes the serpent's assertion that they will not die if they eat the fruit not exactly a lie.

But the story isn't really meant to explain a lot about temptation and sin – it is a story meant to answer the burning question that comes up in response to the creation story from Genesis that precedes it: "If God made the world and everything in it, and said it was good, why is the world such a mess?" Why is there so much pain and death and cruelty in a world that is supposed to be good, and ruled over by a God who is supposed to be good? Like many ancient stories, the story of Adam and Eve's temptation is meant to explain why the world is the way it is.

And you don't need to accept the doctrine of Original Sin that Paul hammered out in the epistle to see that the basic answer that the Genesis story provides is true. Most of the suffering in the world is caused by human beings.

Now I know that the Adam and Eve story also tells us that death itself is our fault – that we cast off immortality through disobedience to God – which is a difficult proposition for many modern people of faith to accept, but I think we have to lay that question aside for today, because as Christians we simply can't have a meaningful conversation about death without considering Easter.

What we can think about today, though, is that we, as individuals, as families, as communities, as nations, and as a species, are always either increasing or alleviating the amount of suffering in the world.

You can, of course, think about this in a lot of different ways, from the most local and mundane considerations of how your actions affect the well-being of those with whom you share a home, a workplace or a classroom, to the most global considerations of how the decisions of nations and their leaders affect world hunger, the spread of disease, climate change, and peace.

And here in the Washington area, there are many people who have real power at both ends of that spectrum. In fact, one of the assertions of our church with regard to the Millennium Development Goals to end world hunger is that we all have real power on the global scale – that a tiny portion of our time and money, .07% of it in fact, can make a huge difference in the amount of suffering in the world.

And tiny actions make a difference close to home as well. The extra bit of energy to turn out the lights when you leave a room, to say a kind word when you are feeling grouchy, to do, and I'm not just speaking about my own children here, your chores so that other people don't have to do them, can change lives; can change the world.

Now perhaps this doesn't sound much like a Lenten message. I'm not talking about a discipline of prayer, or fasting, or making your confession, or going on a spiritual retreat, or any of those other, and let me emphasize this, *good and useful things* we're usually encouraging you to do in Lent.

But you've heard those messages over and over. Some of you have been persuaded by them, and others may be yet. Still, the message I have for you this Lent is not about penitence, but about repentance. Penitence means to examine your life and recognize what needs to be changed. Repentance means to change. Its literal meaning is "turn around." So it means to do something new – to be different than you were.

So like all any political candidate, I'm advocating change. Be kinder to the people you live with. Decrease your carbon footprint. Do some volunteer work. Fill your Mite Box. Give .07% of your income to the Episcopal Relief and Development Millennium Development Goals Fund.

These are not Lenten disciplines, to be sure. That would be just plain silly. How could we go back to being mean to our families or become more selfish for Easter? No, repentance ought to be permanent, or it's merely a posture. These are lifetime practices of repentant people.

The world, of course, will not be transformed immediately. The small actions that have the power to transform the world, and even the big ones run up against a world that is extremely resistant to change, whether it be economic justice or rearranging the furniture.

So maybe we should resolve, for Lent, to do the things we can for those close to us and those far away, and to pray about the rest. Once you've exhausted your own reserves of kindness and generosity, there will still be unkindness and selfishness in the world. There will still be war and oppression. So do what you can, and pray for peace and justice.

If indeed our first ancestors indeed traded immortality for the knowledge of good and evil, let us use the knowledge they obtained at such cost for good, that we may repent, and in changing ourselves, change the world.

Amen.