First Sunday of Lent

We have a garden in the first reading, a desert in the Gospel. Where shall we begin? Ordinarily, a garden can be very uplifting. Let’s begin there. Here is an important question right out of the gate though. Did God inspire the author of this passage in Genesis to provide specifics and details into the act of creation, which unfolded eons before the author was born? Or did God give the author inspiration to understand our human state, and sin, and the impact sin has in our world?

That the reading has been placed at the beginning of Lent provides a good clue to how the church invites us to understand this passage. Understand it’s insight into sin, and our Lenten efforts to turn away from sin might be better informed, and perhaps more successful.

But before going there, some background to the creation angle will be helpful. The connection between chaos and sin is important. Genesis actually includes two distinct stories of the beginning; there is the seven days of creation story we will hear at the Easter Vigil, with its message about the goodness of God’s creation, (God saw, and it was good.), woven together with this Garden of Eden story. Here God shapes the clay of the earth, breathes life into it, but the human created falls into sin, and loses access to paradise.

While describing creation in very different ways, the two stories share some assumptions which are quite alien to us. We believe God created everything out of nothing. No raw materials, if you will. But that understanding was reached over centuries. When the Catechism teaches about God creating out of nothing, no reference to these ancient accounts is made. Rather, the text quoted is from Maccabees, a text composed at the very end of the Old Testament period, after the influence of Greek philosophy began to impact a Semitic notion of the world.

Both of the stories in Genesis assume that there was this formless watery chaos before the reach of history. The miracle of creation was God bringing order out of the chaos – separating the water from the land, planting the garden – two different pictures, but same message. God is the divine artisan, forming, shaping, creating order out of chaos and breathing life into lifeless clay. While through the centuries we’ve come to a deeper appreciation, understanding God as one who creates everything out of nothing, never lose sight of the God who brings order out of chaos, and breathes forth life where life is lacking. That face of God can bring hope into impossible situations!

If the key point is not meant to be a scientific account of the origin of the universe and life, but theological truth about the world and sin, what about sin? What is it? Where does sin come from, and what impact does it have? Genesis tells us that sin is refusing to accept the order and plan of God – I planted a beautiful garden. Take care of it. But leave that tree in the center alone. Defining right and wrong is my prerogative, in fact, my gift to you. Here is the tempter’s message: Come on – why do you need God? Forget obedience, its restricting. Taste the fruit of that tree, forbidden fruit, and YOU can call the shots. You can decide what is right and what is wrong.
Sin deceives us into thinking we are somehow missing out, as if obedience is not for our own well being. It also deceives us into thinking WE can define right and wrong, without God, and without consequences. The truth is, choose sin, and we do actually get more: more suffering, more pain, more alienation, and chaos. This ancient wisdom in Genesis is still true today. It can even help us with that frightful question of why the innocent often suffer. With each choice of sin, turning away from God's plan, more disorder, more chaos, a bigger mess results. It is not just the one who made the choice who may suffer. As God’s plan and order are broken, the resulting chaos affects everyone.

Just one example: As soon as people start believing that telling the truth is not important, that we are free to create our own truth, the world becomes a more chaotic place, more unreliable, unpredictable. The glue of trust starts to fail. Evil has so much more room to work. Or we decide we can decide when destroying life is acceptable. Who suffers? Everyone, including the innocent.

Why would anyone choose chaos over order? We get deceived, just like the 1st reading illustrates. We think our own choices can deliver more satisfaction than God’s design for us. But sin never delivers what it promises. And the result? Shame, blaming, and alienation. You ate the fruit. No, it was the serpent. Curse that snake. Let's cover up. We better hide from God. The garden was uplifting until disobedience and sin entered the picture!

Who would have ever guessed that the desert is the place to find hope and a cause for joy? Here is what St. Paul lays out for us so clearly in the second reading: add up all the bad choices, all the alienation, the impact of every sin since time began, even separation from God; put it all on the scales. Amazingly, Jesus’s incredible obedience, when everyone else would have looked for an easy way out; Jesus resisting temptation, especially in the garden of gethsemane, another garden, opened the way to grace and wonder that far outweighs all the chaos of sin. Redemption is beyond measure, and incredible grace and mercy can be ours. Repent, follow Jesus with our whole heart, and order is more than restored. Instead of a just a little order coming to a messed up human life, we can actually be free to live not only a more ordered human life, but can begin to live the Christ life!

Through this lens, how do we see those three temptations Matthew and Luke bring together in the desert? Throughout his ministry, Jesus was tempted as we all are. The temptation account is an effort to summarize temptations Jesus had to overcome over and over, a quick summary to tell us at the beginning of the story the kind of Messiah we will be getting to know.

In the first temptation, Matthew summarizes the temptation to act first, and pray later, ignoring God’s plan. Turn the stones to bread, then say a blessing, rather than wait for God to provide, as God has promised. The messiah will wait for the order and plan of God to work out, living by God’s word, not create chaos by turning the natural order on its head. Stones in the desert aren’t meant to be food. Going into the desert and fasting include hunger as part of the package. That we don’t live by bread alone was the point! Turn stones to bread and you misuse your gifts, and miss the point altogether!
How many times do I act first, and then pray the course I have chosen will be in tune with God’s will, rather than praying first and waiting for God to show the way, or to give me the bread I truly need? Do I use my gifts to provide for others (like the multiplication of the loaves), or for myself (like turning stones to bread when I am hungry)?

Next temptation: Do something showy for fame and attention, rather than quietly do God’s work for the sake of others. How often did Jesus say ‘don’t tell anyone. Just go and give thanks to God’ after a healing or miracle? His focus was on the person and their need, not getting attention. Jumping from the parapet would have been a fast track to attention and glory. But then what? How would that help anyone? The temptation to become the center of attention is always a big temptation. But the chaos that can result is not pretty. Imagine if Jesus did jump from the temple?! What kind of uproar would have resulted? Look at the chaos created in our day by those craving attention, fame and adulation.

Finally, the temptation to power. Wanting to be king is a huge invitation to pride. The opposite of humility. What kind of Messiah would Jesus be?

- Waiting for the Father to provide, or using his incredible gifts for his own needs?
- Seeking fame and glory, or being the quiet healer, teacher, humbly setting others free?
- A king, at the cost of worshipping Satan, and his own pride, or a humble servant, a crucified Lord, raised in power and glory by the Father after obedience and suffering?

As we think about temptation, about sin, about repentance this week, look closely. Have I experienced how sin brings chaos, not just to me, but others? Has the chaos others brought into the world impacted me or those I love. Can that awareness help stir up contrition, as I realize the ripple effects of sin?

Those who have experienced the trap of addiction begin the path to recovery when they can say: “My life has become unmanageable. Addiction has created chaos.”

Next they come to recognize that a power greater than themselves, the power we call God can restore order and sanity.

Most importantly, they make a decision to turn their will and their lives over to the care of God.

It requires humility. But so does truly living the Gospel. May our Lenten journey lead us away from the chaos sin creates, and into the good order God offers as a precious gift. May we grow ever closer to the God who draws life and blessing, redemption and new life out of the chaos we know only too well. May our Lenten journey lead us step by step to Easter joy, the Joy of the Gospel.