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Jesus Came to Destroy the Devil's Work

Every year the First Sunday in Lent takes us to the wilderness where Jesus began the war to crush the devil's head. The first battle in the war pitted three satanic temptations against the promises of God in scriptures. Quoting those scriptures, Jesus defeated Satan in round one of the great war. Satan's temptations are no longer aimed at the Champion, but at his people. That battle will continue until Jesus returns and destroys the devil's power forever.

Sermon Genesis 3:1-21

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?'" ²The 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 certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. ⁵"For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

⁶When 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. ⁷Then 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.

⁸Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. ⁹But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?" ¹⁰He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid." ¹¹And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" ¹²The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it." ¹³Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

¹⁴So the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, "Cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. ¹⁵And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring ^a and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

¹⁶To the woman he said, "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."

¹⁷ To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat from it,’ “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. ¹⁸ It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹ By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”

²⁰ Adam named his wife Eve, ^p because she would become the mother of all the living. ²¹ The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.

Introduction: It’s always been hard to get a handle on truth. What sets the standard for truth? What makes truth truth? Some people say that natural law determines truth. Deep down people have a sense of what’s true and what’s false. But the conscience can lose its edge so we need laws that are written down. From Sinai to SCOTUS legal codes determine truth and error. Jesus said that God’s Word is truth: **If you hold to my teachings, he said, you will know the truth.** Modern thinkers insist that truth comes from observation: You have to see truth to believe it. Nowadays you don’t have to see truth at all. If something is true for me or for you, it must be the truth. People today don’t have to obey truth or believe truth or observe truth; they just have to feel truth. Pontius Pilate wasn’t the first and he won’t be the last to ask the cynical question: What is truth?

This is all just so frustrating to us Christians. People deny natural law by giving mothers the right to murder their unborn children and giving poor people the right to steal. People compromise written laws by defunding the police and releasing criminals. People write off the Bible’s miracles as myths and make believe. Modernism gives us the good of medicine but also promotes the evil of evolution. Post-modernism insists there are no standards for truth at all. We shake our heads and raise our fists and lose our tempers and we condemn our colleges and courts and our congress for destroying the reality of truth.

And sometimes we forget how much trouble we have with truth. We can handle obvious truth; we can identify obvious lies. Where we struggle is when something is half true and half false. “Real men don’t hit women” sounds like the truth but it’s a half-truth: real men don’t hit anyone. “All I need to do is apologize” sounds like the truth but it’s a half-truth: A real apology requires a change. Benjamin Franklin wrote, “Half a truth is nothing more than a great lie.”

The First Reading for today is from Genesis chapter 3 and it sets the stage for everything God tells us from Genesis 4 to Revelation 21. It identifies the primary human problem and announces the exclusive divine solution. It describes the problem and identifies the solution in terms of half-truth and truth—Satan’s half-truth and God’s truth. It warns us about the half-truth and comforts us with the truth. And it reminds us of this:

The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth

Half-truths destroy us; the whole truth delivers us

We don’t know nearly as much as we’d like to know about the beginning of evil on our planet. God tells us what we need to know: At a certain point in time one of God’s created angels came to resent God’s majesty and challenged it. His name was Satan and God threw him out of heaven and gave him a new home in hell. Satan was down but not out. He was hell-bent on destroying God’s majesty by crushing God’s creation and kidnapping God’s creatures. That’s where we are at the beginning of Genesis 3. Here’s what Moses wrote: **Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made.** Seems as though Eve knew about serpents; talking snakes would terrify us but this talking snake didn’t seem to bother Eve. What she didn’t know was that this serpent was Satan. What’s more, she didn’t know he wanted to destroy her. He used a series of half-truths to do it.

Half-truth number one: **Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?** God never said that and Eve caught it. **We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, 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.’** That was a half-truth. It was more than God said—he never said the fruit could not be touched—and it was less than God said—they could *certainly* eat from the other trees and if they ate the forbidden fruit they would *certainly* die. Half-truth number 2: **You will not certainly die, for God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.** The truth was that they were created in God’s image and had the reasoning power and mental ability to administer the garden as God had. The truth was that they already knew the difference between good and evil: refraining from the forbidden tree was good and eating from the forbidden tree was evil. The truth was that they could never be like God to determine what was good and what was evil. Eve bought into Satan’s half-truths and then she bit on the forbidden fruit. And so did Adam. And all they gained was the shame of their nakedness and the need to cover their shame. They gained nothing and lost everything. Satan’s half-truths destroyed Adam and Eve and destroyed the human race along with them.

The half-truth remains Satan’s most powerful attack weapon. His frontal attacks are easy enough to spot and avoid. We don’t kill and we don’t rob banks. But the lie that sounds like truth is like poison gas: we don’t always see it or hear it or smell it. And too often we buy the lie and believe the lie and we fall into sin and shame. Before we know it, we’re imitating those half-truths. When they hid from God, Adam and Eve weren’t really afraid because they were naked. Of course they were naked, but the truth was they hid from God because they knew they were going to die. Adam blamed Eve for making him eat; of course he was right; half right. Eve blamed the serpent for making her eat; of course she was right; half right. The truth was that both Adam and Eve had the ability and the will to say no and they didn’t. They had no one to blame but themselves. “The devil made me do it” is a colossal half-truth. So is “I couldn’t help myself;” so is “Everyone else is doing it;” so is “No one will know.” Like Adam and Eve, we’ve all told half-truths and made excuses with half-truths. Satan’s half-truths lead us to our half-truths and all those half-truths will destroy us.

God responded with the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. **The Lord God said to the serpent, ‘Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life.’** When’s the last time anyone heard a snake talk or saw a snake walk? God had spoken the truth to the snake. **To the woman God said I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children.** Ask any mother if God was speaking the truth here. **To Adam God said, Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food.** You don’t have to be a farmer to see the truth in painful toil, thorns and thistles, and sweating brows. And God said, **You will return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.** Which is exactly what happens to all of us. God tells the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

2. Just after his baptism in the Jordan River **Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.** Three times Satan came after him and, of course, he attacked Jesus with half-truths: Make bread from stones and your hunger will be gone. Jump from the temple tower and your life will be spared. Bow down and worship me and you will own the world. Jesus counter-attacked and he defeated the satanic half-truths with the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth: The Word of God—**It is written** Jesus said.

In Genesis chapter 3 God introduced his Conqueror to Satan, to Adam and Eve, to the world, and to us. God said to the satanic serpent, **I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”** In those 25 words God announced the entire history of the world from that day to the last day. In those words are Paradise lost and Paradise restored. In that promise is the cross outside Jerusalem and the new Jerusalem in heaven. Here are the rejection and the suffering and the

punishment that brought us peace. Here is the Lord who laid on his Son the iniquity of us all. Here is the Savior who crushed Satan with **It is written** in the wilderness and with **It is finished** on the cross. And here we can be sure that the day will come when **the devil who deceived the nations will be thrown into the lake of burning sulfur and will be tormented day and night forever and ever**. This is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and this truth delivers us from sin and Satan and death and hell. Jesus said, **The truth will set you free**.

With a Savior in the future, God didn't end life at Eden. **Adam named his wife Eve because she would become the mother of all the living**. God provided clothing made of garments of skin. He provided meat and drink, house and home, land and cattle and all they needed. And he does the same for us. We live in a world of sin but we do not live without grace and hope. We live with Jesus **who came to destroy the devil's work**. And this is most certainly true. Amen.