

Sermon on 1 Lent A: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7, primary; Matthew 4:1-11
Preached at Custer Lutheran Fellowship on 2-10-2008 by Pastor Dave Van Kley

Wise as Serpents, Innocent as Doves

We all have them, packed away in old photo albums. Pictures of you and your sister, ages 1 and 2, naked in the bathtub, grinning like Cheshire cats. That yellowed snapshot of you in a high chair, eating your first piece of birthday cake, frosting from head to toe. A wide smile creases your face, not a trace of embarrassment or shame.

A friend of mine tells a delightful story about her son, Mark, when he was very small. For months, Mark collected the fallen feathers of birds, convinced that if he gathered enough of them, he could fly. His mom tried to discourage him, of course, but one day, she saw him in the back yard, his arms pasted full of feathers, ready for take off. What a picture of innocence! Mark believed he could do **anything**

Were you here a couple of weeks ago when I couldn't get the lights to work during the children's sermon and Ramsey Karim quickly volunteered: "My **Dad** could fix it"? **Her** Dad, **Monni**—a **financial manager** for Black Hills Power and Light! I don't think so! But to a little girl, Dad can do anything.

Today's first lesson is about innocence. Adam and Eve live in perfect harmony with God, each other and creation: eating fruit and planting flowers, lost in talk and laughter, work and play. One of the verses omitted from the reading puts it this way: "the man and the woman were both naked and were not ashamed." Such innocence!

If you're lucky, even as adult, you know the feeling. Not that you walk around naked in public! But there are times when you forget what others think and lose yourself in what you're doing. A favorite song comes on the radio and you start singing along at the top of your lungs. With friends at Stockade Lake, you feel so footloose and fancy-free that you dance a jig—or try to, given your age! All alone beneath the moon and stars, you start yipping like a coyote just to see if they will answer! Some years ago, I had to speak at an affair honoring my mentor, Pastor Rudy Kemppainen. Hundreds of people were there and I was very nervous. But when I stood up to speak, I became lost in the moment. Emotions came out like sweat in a sauna. I laughed with my belly. Tears of gratitude rolled down my face. It was wonderful!

Perhaps those are the moments we enjoy most in life, those self-forgetful moments, those Adam and Eve moments. But they pass so quickly! Why is that?

Genesis provides a profound explanation called "the fall" in Christian theology. It begins with the serpent planting a seed of suspicion in Eve's innocent heart. "Did God say that 'you shall not eat of **any** tree in the garden'?" "No," responds Eve, "God just said that we can't eat from **one** tree or we'll **die**." But Eve wonders and the serpent liberally fertilizes her suspicion: "Silly girl! Can't you see what God is up to? Why do you think that tree is called the tree of **knowledge**? It won't **kill** you to eat that fruit; it'll

make you **wise!** You'll be like God, knowing all things! Think of it! But God is jealous and doesn't want you to be wise!" The serpent made the fruit sound so **good** and God sound so **bad**. Eve and Adam couldn't stop themselves.

The serpent was right about one thing. From that moment, they would know the difference between good and evil. Before that, they'd never thought in those categories. Good and evil make no sense to the innocent. Now, they'd experienced deceit, disobedience, betrayal. And they knew they were naked. Ashamed, they sewed fig leaf skirts and hid themselves.

God hunted them down, extracted the truth from them, and announced the consequences: they would be banished from the garden of innocence forever. The man would struggle to farm the land, the woman to give birth. Later, one of their sons killed the other. They aged and died. The party was over. To quote the famous poem by Milton: **Paradise Lost**.

Their story is **our** story. Many times, temptation overwhelms us. We disobey our parents, our spouse, our own hearts. As a child, we meet death in the carcass of a deer decomposing along the highway and then in the hospital with someone we love. Our eyes open wider. No longer innocent, we feel shame, guilt, fear, anger. And we begin to hide ourselves—our **true selves**—from each other, from God.

We may wish to go back. You may recall the words of Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young in the song **Woodstock**: "we've got to get ourselves back to the garden." They weren't just singing about upstate New York; they were singing about the garden of **Eden!** A former colleague of mine, a pastor, actually tried to do this, retiring to a nudist camp in Kissimmee, Florida. Did it work? I doubt it, because with or without clothes, George is still 75 years old and a sinner.

Where does our hope lie? Not in this text, but beyond it. First, God did not leave Adam and Eve in their shame and nakedness. God still loved them, fallen though they were, and made garments out of skins to cover their shame. God does not, will not, and cannot desert us.

Second, God provided a sequel to the drama in the garden: **Eden II!** In the gospel, we meet the devil again—this time, without a disguise. As usual, he knows what buttons to push: "You haven't eaten for a long time, have you?" he says to Jesus; "why not turn these rocks into bread? What harm could it do?" "You think you're the Son of God? **Prove** it! I dare you to throw yourself down from these rocks and see if God rescues you!" "Worship me just this once and every man, woman, and child in the world will become your disciple!" If Adam and Eve had been there, no doubt they'd have risen to the bait. But Jesus saw through the deception, said, "No, thank you" and moved on.

In some profound way, Jesus' victory in the wilderness makes up for Adam and

Eve's failure, **our** failure, in the garden of innocence, just as his resurrection overcomes our own deaths. God covers our shame by "dressing us" in Christ. Salvation means hiding ourselves under the cover of Christ's goodness. And it means struggling to choose the good instead of the evil **because** we belong to him. Not that it's easy.

When Jesus sent his disciples out into the world, he told them to be "as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves." We can't **return** to a state of innocence. But there is a **new** innocence, a **wise** innocence, that confesses the truth about ourselves and this world, while knowing another way. Call it by any of several names: the innocence of forgiveness, of love, of grace.

Sometimes we think Amish people are backward isolationists, living as if there were no electricity or combustion engines. But there is something about the Amish that smacks of this wise innocence of Jesus. Back in 2006, Charles Roberts opened fire in a one room school at Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania? Ten girls were shot; I believe 6 of them died. I guess you can't hide from evil, no matter how you try! The community was plunged into grief. They wept with the families of victims and they wept with the family of the perpetrator! They forgave him, brought food to his family, and invited the widow to the funerals. They set up a fund to support his family, even as they set up a fund to support the victims' families! Despite the fact that the Amish do not believe in insurance, no one sued the Roberts family! Now, I'm not saying that it would have been **wrong** for the victims to sue; I'm saying that it was **right** for them not to. They were being as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves!

Do you see what a high calling we have as children of God? What difference would it make if we, the people of Custer Lutheran Fellowship were as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves? At school? At work? In our community? In the world?

Jesus told the thief on the cross, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." It may be a "hell of a world" out there, but there's a new paradise right here, in the midst of it. A wise innocence which is ours, through faith in Jesus Christ, the Lord. Amen.