

February 22, 2026  
The First Sunday in Lent, Year A  
Trinity, St. Louis  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

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

*Psalms 32*

*Romans 5:12-19*

*Matthew 4:1-11*

*In the Name of our Gracious God, the Holy & Undivided Trinity. Amen.*

For some Christians, throughout history and still today, the details of Jesus's humanity are often avoided. To be sure, we affirm the Incarnation in our creeds, but looking at the human bits too closely seems a bit uncouth. But Lent is precisely the season when the Church invites us to grapple with the messiness of humanity – both Jesus' and our own.

On Wednesday, we began the season with ashes on our foreheads, remembering our createdness as well as our mortality – the limitations of our physical bodies. From that austere beginning, today we venture out into the wilderness like Moses, like Elijah, and like Jesus. All these journeys share the same burning question, “who do you think you are?”

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To get a running start on this question, let's look at the stories of our first ancestors. Today we hear bits of the second of two creation stories in Genesis.<sup>1</sup> In this version of the story, God makes a human being from the dust. Only then does God create a garden, placing the human in the midst of it to care for it. Then, concerned about the human's loneliness, God creates the animals and, finally, another human being to be, as the King James Version puts it, a helpmeet, a partner to the first. Life is good.

Then a serpent slithers into the story, whispering that God was withholding some blessing from the human creatures. There is, the serpent hisses, a good that God could give, but will not. After all, God had warned the first human not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Notice that it is the tree of the knowledge of good *and* evil, not good *or* evil. Eating of the fruit is to know all that it is possible to know.

The point is not that discerning *between* good and evil is somehow wrong, but rather that trying to have *all* knowledge is a grasping to be God, to be without limit. This is the warning God gave to Adam, the first gardener.<sup>2</sup>

And we all know what happens next, don't we? The serpent, the original Snake Oil Salesman suggests that being a limited, finite human being just wasn't good enough. There

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<sup>1</sup> NB the other Creation accounts in Scripture, particularly Job 38-41.

<sup>2</sup> Gratitude to The Rev. Dr. Rebecca Wright, retired from teaching Old Testament at the School of Theology at Sewanee.

was another option for enlightenment and moral sophistication, right over there, just within reach. Who did they think they were?

By naming their incompleteness, the serpent makes it real, drawing their attention away from God to focus on their want, their lack, their need, like a dentist probing at a cavity. The doubt awakens their senses to something other than God. Sin is already at the door, even before a hand reaches out to grasp the fruit.

And there we have it. The Fall. What theologians came to call Original Sin. Which, it must be noted, was not as original as the goodness of creation, so I am waging a campaign to change the brand name from Original Sin to Subsequent Sin.

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What happens next (right after today's reading ends) is what Robert Wilson, one of my Old Testament professors, called the first recorded "sideways" conversation. God asks Adam a question; Adam blames Eve; Eve blames the snake. No one gives a straight answer, not one of the three characters accepts responsibility. They are all culpable, they all face consequences.

But the interpretation of this mythic story misplaces the blame and teaches us to do the same. In the words of Flip Wilson's character Geraldine Jones: "The Devil made me do it!"

The tragic history of this interpretation, and its retelling, has served as a hurtling steamroller of unexamined assumptions about and recriminations against women; that women exist only as attachments to men, as objects or commodities. And it's still happening. Trad Wives, #MeToo, and the Epstein files are just the tip of this horrific iceberg.

When a sideways interpretation becomes set in stone, overwhelming the story itself, we become blinded from the possibility of learning that Adam and Eve do not need to be two historical figures who destroyed our chance to live in Paradise, but that these first humans are connected to us, they are us, all of us, from the beginning of time.

This story has the potential to teach us that temptation and sin are part of the human condition. God created us with free will, which comes with the responsibility of choice. Human nature being what it is, at some point our earliest ancestors would have chosen to act out of anxiety and insecurity, reaching out to grasp more. As Oscar Wilde wrote, "I can resist everything except temptation."<sup>3</sup>

It is the same with us; it is part of who we are...human. All of us are born into a heritage of finger pointing and misplaced blame, repeating stories that hurt, resulting in victim-blaming, racial profiling, partisan polarization, and much, much more.

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Which brings us to Jesus in the wilderness, famished after forty days of fasting. Physically, he's at the end of his rope. Socially, he's isolated and friendless. Spiritually, he is struggling to puzzle out his identity as the glow of his baptism fades.

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<sup>3</sup> Spoken by the character of Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), Act I.

Enter the tempter. Not a silly figure in red tights, but a sinister exploiter of weakness, the Snake Oil Salesman now with centuries of field experience. The question he posed to Adam and Eve in the lushness of the first garden was, "can you be like God?"

Now he comes to the exhausted Son of God in the wilderness with a devious reversal of that question: "can you be fully human?" In other words, who do you think you are? "Can you abdicate power, or exercise restraint, or work in obscurity?" The devil isn't asking Jesus to prove who he is. He is trying to provoke Jesus to use the power the devil knows Jesus has.

For a long time, I didn't see the big deal with the devil's taunts. After all, Jesus was starving. Who cared if he zapped a rock or two into bread? Or called upon God's divine protection? Or demanded the worship that was his by right?

Little by little, I have come to understand that the Incarnation must have involved some genuine struggle on Jesus's part to embrace the mystery of both humanity and divinity within himself. And that his sense of vocation probably came to him bit by bit.

For me, there are still times when I long for the divinity of Jesus to overwhelm his humanity, for him to choose the miraculous intervention and the reassuring halo of certainty. Why? Because embracing Jesus' full humanity requires that I confront my own. Especially when tragic news brings me face to face with the messiness of unexpected death and its ripples of loss; and my own powerlessness in the face of all that.

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Over the ages, the Original Snake Oil Salesman has become an international conglomerate. Its mind-numbing sales force has created no end of marketing plans that all ask the same question, "Who do you think you are?" They even have snappy new names, like Algorithm and AI, whose non-human "intelligence" tempts us with the promise that we can know everything there is to know.

Their ancient playbook seeks to create in us a sense of lack, insecurity, and inadequacy with the simple message that *you are not enough; just being human is unacceptable*. You're not smart enough, attractive enough, strong enough, rich enough to deserve respect, love, and acceptance. But here's the thing: it is all a damned lie, a demonic attempt at a kind of identity theft far worse than what we've come to fear on the internet.

So, what are you to do? Where do you look for the answer to who you think you are? The Church invites you to a Holy Lent...but what does that really mean? Here are some suggestions. The Sunday gospel readings for the remainder of Lent will be long and extravagant stories from St. John, stories about how God interacts with us, stories of light and water and resurrection. The early church used these stories for catechumens as they were prepared for Holy Baptism, to teach them what Christianity was all about. This year, maybe you could read the stories beforehand, and then on Sunday morning, listen to them deeply letting them draw you into a deeper life with Christ.

Between Sundays this Lent, you could allow yourself to be led into a wilderness of some sort. What that wilderness looks like will be different for each of you. But it should be a time and place that you can more fully embrace your own humanity; to look inward and ask, *who do I think I am*; to pay attention to how you navigate your humanity, permitting God to form and re-form the dust that is you.

For some folks, Lent is a time to give up things, like chocolate, or meat on Friday. But, if you're looking to let God re-fashion your sense of self, to re-form your dust, this approach seems a tad stingy.

On the other hand, if entered into freely, the traditional Lenten disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving have the potential to carve out space in your life; in your inner life, and in the way you relate to the world around you. Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving allow you the opportunity to lay aside some of the self-protective behaviors you have accumulated; to be brought anew to a sense of God's generous heart. At the same time, they can free your hands to both welcome and serve others. All in all, a sort of spiritual spring cleaning.

And, there's something important about the 40 days. Some behavioral scientists point out that 40 days is how long it takes to establish new habits, new ways of being. It takes time to reorient ourselves to life without some of our precious pacifiers.

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So, friends, who do you think you are? For this season, I hope that you will think to be a follower of Jesus on this Lenten journey that culminates in the great miracle, and paradox, of the Resurrection. As this week's reading from Romans reminds us, the "free gift" of Jesus, the New Adam, to humanity is rooted not in his power but in his sacrifice. This is the scandal the devil could not overcome.

After all, in Jesus' acts of divine power — the healings, exorcisms, mass feedings, and resurrections, how many people did Jesus save? One hundred? Five hundred? Two thousand? Not even the whole of Galilee. But by embracing his humanity, the humanity which is God's gift to us, and that Jesus shares with each one of us, complete with its vulnerability and limitations — in other words, in his quiet willingness to bear a cross — how many did Jesus save? He saved the world.

A blessed Lent to you all. Amen.