

**Sermon - 02/26/23**  
**Ps 32; Gen 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Ro 5:12-19;**  
**Mt 4:1-11 - Transformed by the Free Gift**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Sun in Lent**

Three guys, a Russian, a Swede and a Czech, decided that they wanted to go bear hunting. They read all the books, asked the pros for advice, and got all the state-of-the-art gear.

When they got to the game reserve they told the guard on duty, "If we don't come back in three days, come looking for us." And with that, they drove into the wilderness.

Three days passed and still the guys hadn't shown up, so the guard called the police and started searching for the men. Soon enough they saw two bears, one male and one female, who looked quite fat.

Figuring that the bears had eaten the hunters, the guard shot the female, cut her open and found the Russian and the Swede, unfortunately they were dead.

He then said to his comrades, "Well I guess the Czech's in the male."

You and I are setting out for Jerusalem today. No special equipment required. During these forty days before Resurrection Sunday, we keep a vigil for Jesus. We devote ourselves to prayer, fasting, sacrificial giving and selected Bible readings. We prepare to meet the Risen Christ on that special day. In these Christian disciplines we live out our love for the Lord. The Apostle John taught that we love Him because He first loved us (1 Jn 4:19) – always has, always will. We can trace God's love all the way back to the beginning – in Eden (Eden means "delight"). God filled the man and the woman with His own divine breath and He made a garden for them – paradise. Plenty of good things to eat – not too hard to cultivate. A beautiful life!

But there is a snake in the grass. Some artists depict the snake coiled in the very tree that is the temptation to rebel against God – the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The writer of Genesis says, "Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made." (v 3) This is no plain garden snake. No, this is the incarnation of the fallen, banished angel Lucifer – Satan – the accuser. God allows the serpent to test His beloved human beings, and later in history, even His one and only Son.

We, created in God's image, have a measure of free will. God calls to God's self those who joyfully, willingly accept His sovereign lordship. All others pay cash. What I mean is choosing to go it without God is to face eternity on our own. Our freedom is limited to accepting or rejecting this gift of being made right according to Christ's righteousness. You and I are not made right or made righteous by our own virtue – why? Because we have none. Righteousness, virtue, justification are not in me or you. We are a fallen race.

We are reading the Letter to the Romans chapter five this morning. Let me backtrack a bit. Chapter four teaches that way back when, Abraham was justified by faith. "Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness." (Ge 15:6)

Chapter five begins with "therefore." Since Abraham was justified by faith, so are you – so am I. Abraham is the father of our faith. Now this justification, this being made right before God is the greatest gift in the universe. You and I cannot do this for ourselves. The street definition of self-justification is self-righteousness. And the category of the self-justified man or woman, boy or girl is hypocrite. Jesus saves us from this ugly state of being – pretending we are good and clean and right with the Law of God, when we are sinners saved by grace alone. Grace is a free gift. The Apostle Paul wrote, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Eph 3:8-9)

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Our forefather and mother are Adam and Eve. We didn't do well in the Garden of Delight. God did not strike us dead – He continued to love us unconditionally. It's just that God is holy and good. Holy and loving – loving and holy. God hates sin. Sin brings eternal death. God does not sin, but He acts always in love and holiness.

Even on the day Adam and Eve were banished from Eden, God had a master plan to rescue His beloved human beings from our gross error. The Apostle Paul lays it out for us in our Bible passage for today. Adam did it wrong. Jesus did it right. Adam's "no" to God brought sin and death. Jesus' "yes" brings forgiveness and life. The gift of forgiveness and life is offered freely in these days of grace. I am praying for you and me – and for the Church Universal to journey into the dry wilderness of Lent with Jesus this year. May our devotions be for us a "Spring cleaning of the Soul." And may your assurance and joy in the Lord grow day by day! Amen.