

1st Sunday of Lent [A] 2023

(Holy Trinity)

We have begun a special time of the year for our growth as children of God and followers of Jesus. A wise man once said, “If the Church didn’t have a season of Lent, we would have to invent one.” Bishop Kenneth Untener once wrote in his *Little Black Book* that Lent is like spring cleaning—we clean our houses regularly, but once a year, we move the furniture, and get at all the hidden dirt. That is Lent—moving the furniture and doing the deep cleaning.

There are many wonderful things about living in northwest Ohio, like the weather.... You think I’m joking? Well, we may wish that we had more sunshine here during winter months, but we don’t have hurricanes that destroy everything in their wake; we don’t have earthquakes that destroy every building for miles around; we don’t have forest fires that destroy millions of acres; we don’t have catastrophic floods that sweep away homes and lives; tornadoes are rare, and blizzards an every-50 year- event. I feel fortunate to live in this meteorologically peaceful or boring part of the world, where we enjoy the changing of the four seasons!

Another of the blessings of living here is the great number of cultural venues we have—things like the Toledo Symphony, Opera and Ballet, our world class zoo, the Museum of the Great Lakes, and in my mind, best of all, the Toledo Museum of Art. What a gem! I am enormously proud to take out of town visitors to the Museum and see their gaping reaction when they are overwhelmed by the art in gallery after gallery. I go to the museum for an hour or two, eight to ten times a year, just to walk around leisurely and to bask in the beauty and the creativity of artists from all over the world.

When going through some of the galleries, it has struck me that often the frame around the particular painting is very important—it can highlight the painting and lead the eye to a greater appreciation. It helps us focus. I think that is what Lent is. It helps us to refocus a bit. But at the museum, occasionally I notice that a frame is too much, so beautiful that it takes away from the artist’s work by its own beauty. Then the frame is actually the art-object and the painting is reduced to highlighting the frame.

Our readings on this First Sunday of Lent challenge us: What is the picture and what is the frame? The Fall, as we have come to call Adam and Eve’s sin, and our many repetitions of it, can seem to be the main event. All of Lent and all of Christian spirituality can seem to focus our souls’ eyes on our fallen situation, our rebellion, our envy, pride, disobedience, every manner of sinfulness. This is a pretty reasonable focus and probably even psychologically correct. With this as the *picture*, the *frame* obviously would be the love of our creating God and the divine embrace of us in Jesus. This too would be a good way to look at things. The problem is that this way of viewing ourselves and God is absolutely wrong! We have it totally backwards!

At the Easter Vigil, one of the most ancient and graceful rituals of the Church, there is a beautiful prayer sung at the beginning when the church is darkened and lit only by the Paschal Candle and other candles lit from the new Easter fire. It is called the Exultet, the Latin word for rejoicing. In the middle of the prayer it proclaims, “O Happy Fault”—“*felix culpa*” in Latin, referring to Adam’s sin. “Happy” because it has brought forth such a loving Savior.

Our First Reading begins forming the frame. Our biblical parents have an **identity problem** or issue. They have discovered that there is some knowledge they don’t have, and they want it. They are not content with what they have, what God has given

them. Envy of God moves them to replace God with their being ‘like gods,’ as the serpent had suggested to them. The “fall” reduces them to an eternal vision problem, where they will never again know clearly what is good and what is evil. And so it begins....

The Second Reading begins the refocusing of the picture and the frame. Sin entered the world through one human being, but that is not the main picture. Grace and the great sacrifice far outweigh the first sin. **Jesus is the picture**, and the frame of our human failings directs our attention to the One who died on a cross and was raised from the dead to get us out of this mess.

The Gospel presents us with Jesus, the New Adam. In the previous chapter of Matthew, Jesus is baptized in the Jordan by John. He hears there the Father calling him “the Beloved One.” To continue the image, Jesus has begun to take his place as the main Work of Art, by listening to whom *God* says he is and resisting the temptations to listen to the “enemy of humanity.” That is what those 40 days in the desert were all about.

Over the centuries there has been much speculation on just what these three temptations of Jesus represent. Perhaps they are the usual pattern of Satan, as he has tried to seduce humanity through the ages: pride, envy, lust for power. We all know them. But Jesus’ response to all three human attractions was based solidly in trusting God, rather than having God do tricks so that faith would be unnecessary.

The life-long fidelity of Jesus was framed within the relationship he had with the Father, believing He was what the Father had said, “the Beloved.” Jesus kept this focus... always. And our Lenten focus calls us to remember who God says *we* are as children baptized into Christ, the Beloved. We are the “beloved” as well.

There is, for sure, a Lenten call to repentance and to our being more prayerful, more generous, and more eager to do works of charity. But this is not a dark or gloomy time, as we think about our failures, real as they are. Our participation in the envy, greed, and pride of Adam and Eve is **not ever** to be the main picture, dramatic though they it is. Jesus' whole life, culminating in his death on the cross and ultimately his rising from the dead, is God embracing each and all of us. That is the true work of art.

I once saw a bumper sticker which read, "Eve was framed." (I couldn't see the driver, but I'll give you 10 to 1 that it was a woman!) This is the "joyful season of Lent," because Jesus is framed with our fallen nature and yet He remains at the center as our Savior. O Happy Fault indeed!