

The Two Standards

Homily for Lent 1
March 5, 2017

Genesis 2:7–9, 3:1–7
Psalm 51:3–6, 12–13, 17
Romans 5:12, 17–19
Matthew 4:1–11

The local sheriff was looking for a deputy, and one of the applicants - who was not known to be the brightest academically, was called in for an interview. "Okay," began the sheriff, "What is 1 and 1?" "Eleven," came the reply. The sheriff thought to himself, "That's not what I meant, but he's right."

Then the sheriff asked, "What two days of the week start with the letter 'T'?" "Today & tomorrow." Replied the applicant. The sheriff was again surprised over the answer, one that he had never thought of himself.

"Now, listen carefully, who killed Abraham Lincoln?" asked the sheriff. The job seeker seemed a little surprised, then thought really hard for a minute and finally admitted, "I don't know." The sheriff replied, "Well, why don't you go home and work on that one for a while?" The applicant left and wandered over to his pals who were waiting to hear the results of the interview. He greeted them with a cheery smile, "The job is mine! The interview went great! First day on the job and I'm already working on a murder case!"

This humorous story is also a cautionary tale. People who live their lives without a grasp of history, what I want to call the "Bigger Story" will come to wrong conclusions about the meaning of their lives. Assumptions can be made, that although seemingly sensible and reasonable result in wrong conclusions. Because this job applicant had no understanding of the fundamental American narrative he reached the wrong conclusion about his own personal story.

If this can happen with something as straightforward as who killed Lincoln, (it was John Wilkes Booth, by the way), how much more critical it is to understand our lives in relation to the biggest story of all. That is the story of God entering into relationship with us human beings. If we do not know this story, we will come to conclusions about life that are wrong. For without knowing the plot of God's story we will not be able to rightly understand who we are and why we are here.

The first Sunday of Lent helps to locate us in the story of Jesus Christ so we can come to right conclusions about who we are and why we are here.

So this morning I want us to consider these two ideas, beginning with “why we are here” and then considering “who we are”.

1. So why are we here?

We are here because we are called to be engaged in a struggle that is of epic proportions. The Catechism says of this struggle:

Man is divided in himself. As a result, the whole life of people, both individual and social, shows itself to be a struggle, and a dramatic one, between good and evil, between light and darkness.¹

It is a struggle that St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, described as the “Two Standards”, or “Two Flags”.

In 16th Century Europe, the time when St. Ignatius lived, armies would assemble for battle. One army would have their flag, representing their nation and what they stood for. And the other side would have theirs. Ignatius would say, look the world is in the midst of this cosmic battle. And there are two kingdoms at war. The kingdom of Jesus Christ; that is the kingdom of light, goodness, mercy and truth. Then there is the kingdom of the devil, which is a kingdom of warfare and hatred and opposes everything that Christ stands for. You and I, and every person gets to choose which side we want to fight for. So imagine those two flags and you are standing there before Jesus Christ and he is saying “you pick” Do you want to fight for me or do you want to fight against me? This is the decision and the dignity that each one of us have to make, staring Jesus Christ in the eyes and saying “I am with you”, or being honest enough to sit back and say, “I am against you”. Don’t live in the middle where we pretend it doesn’t matter, the place where many live today. To live in the middle results in reaching wrong conclusions as to why we are here. To do this is to waste and misunderstand the whole meaning of life.

All great stories have this as the central theme, be it Star Wars, The Jedi verses, the Empire; Lord of the Rings, The Fellowship verses Mordor, or Superhero shows like, The Flash, where it is Star Labs verses the evil meta humans.

Saint Augustine talked about the “two standards” by referring to the City of God and the City of Man. Always the choice is the same, a point made clear in our readings for today.

We read that Adam and Eve made to choice to stand under the standard of the serpent. Because of this, they are banished from the Garden of Eden and this world becomes more akin to the Judean wilderness than a paradisiacal resort. It is in the wilderness of this world that the armies line up and we are called to choose, under whose banner will we fight?

¹ Catholic Church. (2000). Catechism of the Catholic Church (2nd Ed., p. 425). Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference.

St. Paul says this same thing, using theological language. The first Man, Adam chose the devil's banner, and while Jesus was tempted to do the same, he said "no way". It is here in the wilderness I take my stand and raise the banner of the Kingdom of God.

This brings me to the second question: Who are we?

People with the opportunity to make the right choices about how we will live. Why do we know this to be the answer as to who are we? Because it is exactly what we see Jesus doing at the beginning of his vocation, presented to us in Matthew 4. The temptation story is where we find Jesus at the outset of his ministry. Jesus is representing our true humanity and makes the choice our first parents would not make.

Here is the point of this passage, as stated so clearly by Pope Benedict.

"At the heart of all temptations... is the act of pushing God aside because we perceive him as secondary, if not actually superfluous and annoying, in comparison with all the apparently far more urgent matters that fill our lives."

That is what we fallen humans do. We live in a world where we are always confronted with the same temptations. We try to satisfy ourselves by bread alone, thinking that the hunger for meaning can be satiated by the acquisition of material things. They may amuse us for a time, but they cannot fill the longing for purpose and meaning, because as Deuteronomy says: "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." But the tempter, from the beginning, has used this mode of operation to tempt us to push God aside, making him secondary.

Next, the devil will try to get us to avoid the question of our mortality or at least be angry at God for it. How many people seem to live their lives without taking seriously this fundamental fact of our existence – death. How often people when faced with the death of loved ones can choose to become angry and distrustful of God. The experience of death can in others have the opposite effect. It brings them to that place of deepening trust in God and hope in the promise of the Resurrection. How we face the question of death, both of our loved ones, and ourselves, can be the setting where we either put God to the test or in meekness trust in his provision and promise.

Thirdly the Devil knows our desire for permanence, for not being forgotten, for the kind of power whereby we can leave our mark. This is where, in the world, we see the hand of Satan most visibly on display. All the wars fought by those nations who wanted to dominate other nations. The power struggles that go on in companies, homes, churches where the lust for status and position – to be like God – rules our lives.

Matthew is intent on showing us that in order to discover who we are we need to look to Jesus, the most authentically human being who has ever lived. He is authentic because he would not buy into Satan's lie. Notice the parallels between Genesis and Matthew. The most obvious is that both are temptation scenes: the first successful (Adam and Eve), and the second

unsuccessful (Jesus defeats Satan). But if we look a little closer, we can see another close parallel. Both Eve and Jesus are tempted with food, death, and power. This threefold temptation overcomes Eve as Adam passively remains on the sidelines. But in the second temptation, the new Adam is the subject of the temptation while the future Eve, the Church, is at a safe distance. Interestingly, in chapters 26, 27, and 28 of Matthew, Jesus will successfully give food to his followers in the Eucharist, go to his death on the Cross, and receive power from the Father in his Resurrection. What Jesus refuses to give to the devil at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, he gives freely at the end of his Gospel. Ironically, what Satan promised to Eve and could not deliver, Jesus offers freely to the new Eve, the Church, in the Paschal Mystery and odes deliver.

So there we have it. We need to know what kind of story we are in so that we can understand why we are here and who we are. The more we meditate on God's word, we will with David understand that God desires truth in our inward being and so will pray:

Teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

The more we understand God's story, the more we will discover our job assignment. Jesus wants to hire us to stand under his standard realizing that til our last breath life is a struggle, and a dramatic one, between good and evil, between light and darkness.