

Sermon for Ash Wednesday

“‘Yet, even now,’ declares the Lord, ‘return to me with all your heart.’ Who knows whether he will not turn and relent?”

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In a garden were we created. In the midst of the green and lushness of paradise were our first father and mother made. In Eden did Adam and Eve dwell together with God, and rejoiced.

‘We were naked, and we were not ashamed’

it is written; that is, we hid nothing from God, and God hid nothing from us.

In every leaf and blade of grass was to us the glory of God visibly present, and in God *‘who walked in the midst of*

the evening through the Garden’ did we see that glory which was imbued into every blade of grass, every leaf. *‘We*

were naked’ for there was nothing anywhere to cover, for all things, even our bodies, were brilliant and shining with God’s holiness and light, even as our Lord radiated divine light on the mount of Transfiguration.

In the garden did God speak to us as His friends, showing us every hospitality: *‘eat of every tree that bears rightful fruit’*. *‘Name every beast and animal, for all of them I give to you as a gift, a tribute of the universe to you, My image.’* And every word He said to us we made our own. So we ate of the good food of the garden. So we named every beast and animal.

And when our God found that, even having befriended every creature which gallops and crawls, having enthralled every star in the heavens and every fish in the sea, having been served by every angel of the celestial throne, we were yet alone, He came to us in compassion, and for us formed from our side woman, who was made of man’s own rib, which is to say, out of his own heart.

In the garden did God speak to us as His friends, and we spoke to Him. For seeing the woman, Adam cried out to His Lord, *‘This at last is bone of my bone and flesh*

of my flesh; she shall be called Woman for she was taken out of Man.' And God so dearly heard these words of man that God made man's words His own. He even had them put into His Bible, the Word of God.

But *'there was a serpent who was more cunning than any of the beasts of the field.'* He uttered words to us. *'Eat of the fruit of the tree, and your eyes will be opened, and you shall be like God.'* So one word of God is placed against one word of the serpent. *'Do not eat of the tree.'* *'Eat of the tree.'*

We chose to make our own the word of the serpent, and so we ate of the forbidden tree, and with that we no longer spoke the words of our God.

No longer did we have *'tongues of fire'* born of the Holy Spirit, but *'tongues of flatterers'*, forked, double-minded, deceitful, demonic, hateful, blasphemous, idolatrous.

The garden rejects us, and God casts us out of it, for in rejecting communion with God and His Word, we have rejected the place where that communion is located. The garden was our first Church, and the fall was our first excommunication. And nowhere now is the garden to be found, for to us, by our sin, it was burned to the ground. As a forest fire ravages and annihilates great woods, so it is that by the sin born of our tongue was the garden of Eden, the garden of our Communion with God, burnt to ash.

We are rejected. We are cast out. We are lost. No longer do we hear God's word. No longer do we make it our own. For we are *of our father the devil*, and it is his words, his vitriol, his gossip, his lies, his complaint, his flattery, that is ever upon our tongues and in our mouths. Behold our *'tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set fire itself by hell.'*

'What then should we do', the crowd asked.

'Yet, even now,'
declares the Lord, 'return to me with all your heart.'

'With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning, rending your heart. Return to the Lord your God.'

'Consecrate a fast, call a solemn assembly; gather the people, sanctify the

congregation, assemble the elders, bring in the children and nursing infants.'

'Who knows whether the Lord will relent?'

'Who knows?' But the Lord may relent, He may have mercy, even as He did for the Hebrews when they sinned under Moses with the golden idol. For this reason we gather here today, to consecrate a fast, to repent, and to return to the Lord.

For we place ashes on our foreheads. And why? Because we return to the garden of Communion with God, to Eden, which by the fire of the serpent's tongue, by the fire of our tongue that we adopted from him, we set ablaze and burnt to the barren earth. We return to the ruin of that Garden, in childish faith that there in the ruination we may still find the presence of our Lord, our dearest friend. Dip your finger into the ash left by every leaf and blade of grass that shined with the glory of God, and with it mark upon your face the image of the cross, for I tell you, there is another tree.

For a day, we mark our face with ashes of Eden. For a day, we remember and weep over the great mistake of our first parents; we remember and weep over our great mistake, for indeed, we were there.

But now, for forty days, we do as our Lord commands. *'And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. Rather anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others, but by your Father who is in secret.'* No longer shall we speak the words of the serpent. But for forty days, we shall learn to pray the Words of our Lord. For a day we bare the ashes in solidarity with our first parents, to keep the commandment *'honor your father and your mother.'* Then shall we fast in secret that Christ's word may be fulfilled in us: *'your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you.'*

He will indeed reward all, those who fast from the things of the flesh, those who fast from things of the world, those who fast from things of the spirit, those who fast from Satan's lies. Those who embrace the truth of God's love. He will indeed reward all, for again I tell you.

There is another tree.

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon texts: Psalm 51:1-13, Joel 2:12-19, 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:10, Matthew 6:1-6