

Homily for the 1st Sunday of Lent

I remember I was at the diocesan center in Harrisburg once for some type of presentation. The presenter was using PowerPoint, projecting the slides on a screen. There were all these nice images of Jesus, including this one that had an impressionistic look to it. You could make out the head, His white robe – textured and all. But, it looked fuzzy. Actually, furry would be a better word – because it turned out that this so-called picture of Jesus was actually the zoomed-in backside of a dog! And the presenter had no idea – they probably just found the image on the Internet! Now, zoomed out, we would have known exactly what we were looking at. But zoomed in?

The big picture often makes all the difference between understanding just a part of what's going on versus the full reality of the situation at hand. For example, liturgically speaking, our big picture is Lent, which we've just begun. But Lent itself is meant to help us confront an even *bigger* picture – one that began a very long time ago in the Garden of Eden. There, the opening scene of the long, complex drama of human history commenced.

In the first reading today, we hear, then, how God formed man out of the clay of the ground – this meager dust of the earth, which on Ash Wednesday, we were reminded we are made of, and are one day to return to. And yet, we are so much more than dust; because at the same time, God breathed into the man's nostrils the breath of life, which enabled him to become a living being. The breath of life – the very life-giving Spirit of God, which gave physical animation and eternal worth to that dust formed into a body.

And God had such beautiful plans for these children He had created. But then along came the serpent, and Satan in bodily form tempted Adam and Eve to taste of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Up to that point, they had only known what was truly good, because that's how God created them. So, why on earth would they ever want to know what evil was? And yet curiosity got the best of them: and they outright disobeyed their loving Father's will, and they ate the forbidden fruit.

But then why is the next thing we hear that they realized they were naked, and then sewed fig leaves together to make loincloths for themselves? Sure their eyes had just been opened to what was good and evil. But, it wasn't that their naked bodies were bad and so they had to cover them up – their bodies after all were created from the dust of the earth by God as fundamentally good! So, what was so “bad” that they had to hide themselves from each other?

Being naked symbolizes being completely vulnerable – that there's nothing to hide. But now there was something to hide: Eve had just tempted Adam with the fruit of the tree, although she would later blame it on the devil. And Adam had failed to protect his wife from the serpent, later blaming it all on her. So, with this “blame game”, it turns out there's plenty to cover up here: shame, guilt, pride, sin. Adam and Eve were no longer completely vulnerable and perfectly open to one another – they couldn't totally trust one another – and so they instinctively protected themselves from the other, who was once a perfect soul mate, but had now become a betrayer and an accomplice to mortal sin.

At the same time, though, they were no longer able to be entirely vulnerable and open to God either. In fact, they hid themselves from Him among the trees of the garden, when He came to look for them in the cool of the night. Sin had harmed Adam and Eve's relationship with God and with one another much more than they could have ever conceived. And now they had to live with the consequences of their choices.

And here's the big picture. As children of Adam and Eve, you and I have not only been born into a world ruled by sin, but we've also inherited the very same consequences of sin. We too hide ourselves from God and from one another. Think about it. How often do you hide yourself from others by showing them just that side of you, you think they would like or accept? Or how often do you hide your real thoughts or feelings in order not to get hurt? It can be very difficult to really be vulnerable before one another, even for husbands and wives.

And what about our relationship with God? Do you ever try to rationalize your sins, saying: "At least I'm not as bad as so-and-so", trying to minimize the guilt? Or, do you ever find yourself avoiding time with God in prayer, because it's easier to keep busy than it is confronting what you shouldn't be doing? When we do things like this, though, there are consequences. Sure, we don't die on the spot – neither did Adam and Eve. But, when we disobey God, death is doled out and forced upon us – death in terms of shame, hurt, feelings of inadequacy, jealousy, and insecurity, and the list goes on and on.

And honestly, all of this really gets in the way of us being vulnerable before the One who made Himself completely vulnerable before us on the cross. Sin gets in the way of you having a deeply intimate relationship with God. And the big picture is that Lent is a time of paying special attention to our sins and areas in which we struggle, and asking God for His mercy and forgiveness, especially in the sacrament of Reconciliation, and asking for His grace and strength, which we don't have on our own. And we go out of our way to do so, because He has first done so for us. God bless you.