

## Carne Vale: The Time Without Meat

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May the words of my month and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh God, our Strengthener our Redeemer. Amen. As you can tell, I'm late and it's been one of those times when the airplane was late. The luggage didn't come, and it goes on from there; but lost and now found. It is a pleasure to be with you today. I'm not blaming the earthquake in Japan for just about everything that happened. In fact, what I want to talk to you about is a life beyond blame, so please forgive me, Joanne Anquire, and we'll see what we can do.

It is a wonderful thing to be able to have the first Sunday in Lent with you, and to have both of these really archetypal texts. The one, about how someone ate the wrong apple and had us deprived of Eden. The other is in the way of fulfillment of the first text; the way Jesus changed what we would do when offered the chance to do something that we either should not, or would not.

Jesus' refusal of the devil's temptation takes us back, redeems the first text. But it also reminds us of where we live now. My theme will be that, we are going forward to the garden - not back to the garden - and I want to correct the typical theology of the Genesis story. In that story, the message we get is - we have a mean and judgmental God and some very foolish people, who do the very one thing God doesn't want them to do. They eat the one apple they can't have, just as they are told there are all these wonderful, wonderful apples. Saint Paul went on to say that human beings can be characterized as those of us who do the thing we would not, and do not do the thing that we would.

And so in this text we have a kind of lore or basic beginning story. 'Bad God - Stupid people - Apple eaten - Eden lost.'

But if you think about any one of those four things, it strikes you as just a little bit too small for the greatness of our loving God. The first one is "Bad God." God is not bad. God forgave people for doing many worse things than eating an apple over time. In fact, if you read the entire first testament, it's one long story of God saying "Oh, you didn't," and the people saying "Oh yes, we did," and God saying "Oh then, let's go on from here. Try not to do it again," We do not have a bad God; we have a loving God who sticks with us.

"Stupid people." - Well yes; and in what ways were they stupid to do the one thing that they were told not to do, to eat the one apple when clearly there were hundreds of others?

Human beings can't seem to get over competing with God. We know that there are at least three versions of sin. One is that very simple one, which we miss the mark of our humanity and decide instead of being humans, we'll be God. The second is Martin Luther's wonderful phrase: incurvatus in se. We are curved in on ourselves. We think that we matter much more than we do. And then the third is just the typical idolatry, which goes to the first. We want to be like God. So, if God says, "There's one apple that's only for God." "Well, God bless it, that's my apple, because then I get to be God." Big mistake! Apple eaten!

Again, of all the sins we have committed against each other, that interesting, forbidden fruit can't be the worst. Eden lost? No, Eden is not lost. Eden is tomorrow, not yesterday. So, we come into Lent saying to ourselves, "How can we get rid of that old and simplistic theology - 'bad God, Stupid people, Apple eaten, Garden lost.' And how can we imagine that Jesus has saved us from ourselves and has loved us so much that he's even willing to talk the devil down?

So, here we find ourselves hoping for a Lenten season where we can do something to mark the deepest truth of what we know about almighty God. That God loves us. That God wants us to have hundreds and hundreds of apples. There's a garden ahead of us and not just behind us. That all is not loss, nor is all lost. We can get over that story.

Well. Lots of people think you can get over that story by denying something for 40 days. You know the original version of carne vale - without meat. So, for 40 days, I won't eat. I will repent that bad apple situation. And the next thing you know, I will rise with Jesus. Boy, I wish it was that easy!

I don't think you can do the right thing for 40 days or the repentant thing for 40 days, and thereby earn your resurrection. I think, you got to do it before Lent and during Lent and after Lent, because we're not appeasing loss, we are achieving garden. There is a big difference. Garden is both ahead of us, and not just behind us.

So, whatever behaviors we do in Lent - whether we do eat meat, or don't eat meat, or do eat candy, or don't eat candy; or in the latest trends, add something new like centering prayer for 10 minutes a day, or count up our carbon moments even better than we usually do. Whatever the mark of this new and good behavior, it's not about appeasing a loss; it's about creating a pattern.

I was so taken to learn that Gandhi was not a vegetarian. Did you know that? Of all people, would you not have assumed that he would be a vegetarian? Well, he's not. So you've got to be really careful when you say carne vale - or without meat, or without any kind of sin - that you're not assuming that you can appease God; or that by doing the right thing, all of a sudden you're going to be OK; or by not doing so much of the wrong thing.

That implies the bad God. What we have is a loving God who loves you whether you do the right thing, or don't do the right thing; eat the right thing, or don't eat the right thing; do it yesterday, today, or tomorrow. God is not interested in those behaviors. Similarly, in the apple or not the apple.

God is interested in the turning of the heart. That makes it somewhat automatic to know that when God says, "Would you please just not eat of that one tree," that you say, "Ah, yes. I remember. I am not God. I am not even Jesus. I am to be as God-like as I can; and as Jesus-like as I can." But that comes from a full heart. That comes from knowing that, for some reason, God has allowed us to stay in the beautiful garden.

So, let me tell you what I hope to do for my Lent. And I'm sure that as I speak to you, I know I'm speaking to people whose hearts are newly heavy by the events, the natural or unnatural events of the hurricane and the tsunami. And I think we come to this Lent really wondering, "Oh my God. What's next? What can possibly happen?"

And when I say that, I want to describe a Lenten practice. It is this: I want to learn how not to be so cause and effect. So full of blame! Don't you look at the situation in Japan and say, "Whose fault is this?" Don't you want to know the reason? Wouldn't it be great if you could just rail against nuclear power? You know, and be right about that? Or rail against not having nuclear power. And be right about that? Or find some way, to find some human thing, or person, or group, or climate change.

And then, we would have what parents have. When a child commits suicide, parents always want to say, "It was because of - blank, blank, and blank." Why? Because it's easier to have a reason than to live with utter mystery, lack of control, and uncertainty. Roommates will say, "Oh, that happened because we didn't invite her to that." Well, of course, it didn't happen for that one reason. But if we have a reason, it re-establishes our control.

For me, this Lent I want to have fewer reasons, especially reasons that go to issues of blame. Now I know who did it. Now I know who's at fault. Now I can repent, do my 40 days of good deeds, and come back into a moment of salvation.

What we will learn as these 40 days go on is that, we cannot have such simple pieces of peace. But something larger is laid out for us. And it is the turning of the heart towards the love of God, who got over the apple and who pushed us forward into a new garden.

I tend to read quite a bit of the "New Yorker Magazine" and to try to figure out what theme their cartoons of the month have. They often have a theme and you think you're very sly if you finally get it. I think the March 11th theme for the humor of the 15 or so was about losing status.

It's another thing I'd like to lose. I always want to have just a little more status than someone else; the kind of person who would never show up this late for something, the kind of person who was just a little bit more well-read, or more theologically astute. It seems not to be working for me.

The first cartoon I would call your attention to, is the one where a woman says to her husband, "Ever since I've been laid off, this work or family thing is working really well for me." I love that idea, that she can lose a job and then declare herself effective at the work or family thing. She's giving a reason. She's saying why she's OK. She is doing what we might call self justifying.

Another woman is reading through her alumni magazine. And she's one of those pointy-nosed women that the cartoonists do so well. And she reads through the magazine and she says, "Ah. If I wanted to feel good about myself, I never should have gone to such a good college in the first place." She's competing with her peers. Self justifying and finding a reason for why her status is ever so slightly lost! She's trying to get back to a garden of self approval. When the garden is ahead of her, in worrying less about how she appears to her peers.

The third one is about two women gossiping about a third who is absent. And one says to the other, "I've been telling her all along that she should publish those stupid little pieces online." What is she saying? - That, her friend is a stupid little writer. Why is she saying that to her other friend? So that she can feel there is some reason why she's OK in the mix of things.

And the final one - Two corpulent business people speaking to each other about the situation in Egypt. The one says to the other, "I am so thrilled about what's happening over there, and I certainly hope it doesn't come over here." His status is threatened by the liberation of others.

When all we can think of is how to get back to the garden of original peace; all we can do is to come up with explanations and come up with self comparisons. Depend on status instead of salvation. When we can imagine ourselves going forward to a garden, the door to which has been opened by the mighty act of love in Jesus, God's most creative idea, the door to a future garden is open.

Our temptations lie in thinking that the garden is lost and that God does not love us. Our freedom in our salvation is in remembering that the garden's right there and the door to it is open to us; whether we fast well, eat meat, eat candy or even lose status. Become people who have all the answers. You see, we can keep on sinning as long as we remember that God's love will overcome even that. Amen.

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