

1st Sunday of Lent (Year A) – March 5, 2017

GN 2:7-9; 3:1-7; PS 51:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 17; ROM 5:12-19; MT 4:1-11

Watching a really good magician perform makes us wonder *how* they do what they do, even as we know that their “magic” is not *really* magic at all.

Magicians can't **really** make things appear out of thin air. After all, if a *skillful* magician really *could* make a **rabbit** or a **bird** appear out of thin air, then a *wise* magician would make *money* appear out of thin air and, thus, make his **need** to do **magic shows for a living...disappear!**

But we don't tend to ask these kinds of logical—*as a trick is unfolding*— because we get wowed by the show itself.

And that's all by design!

Much of what constitutes a magician's “magic” is nothing more than **sleight of hand**—*skillful distraction* on the part of the performer—to make the audience pay attention to something in **one place**—while the important thing is happening in *another place*...to get us to focus on the **insignificant**, in order to distract us from the *important*.

Through the use of **distraction**, a skillful magician **creates an expectation** in the audience, and then *fulfills* it in a way that **appears** to defy **common sense** and violate the **laws of physics**.

A good magician causes the audience to **wonder**...“**How did he do that?**”

A **satisfied audience** simply basks in *wonder* over the **performance** and admires the **showmanship** of the **performer**.

On the other hand, the quickest way to **kill** this sense of **wonder and awe** is to insist on knowing *how* a magician does a trick.

It always seems—from the outside—that knowing **how** a trick is done would be deeply satisfying. And yet, if you ever *have* learned how a particular trick is done, the sense of wonder is instantly displaced by **disappointment**. The adult **intellect** and **ego** might be satisfied by the knowledge, but the *childlike amazement* disappears.

That's what Adam and Eve discovered the hard way. God gave them a share in his own life...and a home full of **beauty** and **wonder**. To top it off, he gave them his **personal** love and friendship.

God asked of Adam and Eve just one thing: *“Don't let your **curiosity** and **desire** overtake your **gratitude** and **wonder**. Don't try to **know** and **do** what only God **knows** and **does**. Receive and delight in the wonders I have bestowed on you. Let me be your loving Father who lavishes gifts on you, and don't try to make me obsolete by assuming for yourselves what I willingly provide for you.”*

So God set a limit for Adam and Eve—symbolized in the command not to eat the fruit of the **Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil**.

Then along came a *malicious* **magician**—Satan himself.

Like a professional magician, *Satan tries to make human beings believe that he possesses the ability to do things that he can't actually do*. Satan works unceasingly to convince us that he has our best interest at heart. He tantalizes with things that delight the **eyes**, tempt the **tummy** and stroke the **ego**. And he practices constantly to perfect his craft...every hour...of every day.

He paints a picture of a life full of **pleasure**, **power**, **wealth** and **honor** and presents it to each human being for a seemingly small price:

Disobedience.

We can see how he duped Adam and Eve by **focusing** on his words:

He asked the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You shall not eat from any of the trees in the garden?’” The woman answered the [serpent]: “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; it is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, ‘You shall not eat it or even touch it, or else you will die.’” But the [serpent] said to the woman: “You certainly will not die! God knows well that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, who know good and evil. (Gen 3:1-5)

Consider the progression of the dialogue:

Satan caused Eve to *doubt*: “Did God **REALLY** say...?”

Then he followed up with a *lie*: “You won’t die.”

Then he suggested a particular course of *action*: “Take what belongs to God...and become a “god” yourself.”

Like a magician adept at misdirection, the Devil got Eve to *look away from God*...and to look to *herself*. He convinced her to ask, “**What’s in it for me?**” instead of recalling how “*The Almighty has done great things for me!*” (cf. Lk 1:49).

And once Eve and Adam realized what had happened, their **wonder** and **joy** was overwhelmed by **fear**.

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked...When they heard the sound of the LORD God walking about in the garden...the man and his wife hid themselves from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. The LORD God then called to the man and asked him: Where are you? He answered, “I heard you in the garden; but I was afraid...” (Gen 3:7-10)

By learning the hard way how the Devil pulled off his trick—their eyes were opened, and they did, **indeed**, know good and evil—**God’s good**...and **their evil**. Adam and Eve’s first-hand, after-the-fact knowledge of the Devil’s tactics caused death—theirs...and yours...and mine, as St. Paul wrote to the Romans in our 2nd Reading today:

...death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who did not sin after the pattern of the trespass of Adam... (Rom 5:14)

Satan’s victory against Adam and Eve was to convince them that **God**—and not the Devil—**was the “cheap magician”** who wanted to trick them by keeping the best for himself. By diverting Eve’s attention away from **God’s love** and pointing it to **God’s power**—he manipulated Eve’s desire and convinced her to take for herself the secret of God’s knowledge. By a simple act of **disobedience**, she could transfer that power to herself and her husband, or so the Devil promised!. As soon as she took the bait, and shared it with her husband, the love and the joy magically... **disappeared**...just as the Devil knew it would.

Much, much later, the Devil set his sights on **Jesus**. But this time, it was the **Messiah** who *prevailed*, and the **cheap magician** who *failed*. Satan no doubt knew that Jesus was the Son of God. Nevertheless, he let his **pride** get the best of him, because he clearly believed that Jesus was vulnerable enough to fall to the same sly tactics he used on Adam and Eve—**Son of God, or not!**

So he started with what he knew Jesus needed at that moment—**food**—while simultaneously trying to get Jesus to doubt his true identity:

If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread. (Mt 4:3)

The Devil's first shot across the bow failed because he was unprepared for **Jesus' total obedience to his Father**, which Jesus would later sum up to his disciples in these words:

My food is to do the will of him who sent me... (Jn 4:34)

When Jesus countered Satan's first attempt with the Scripture quote...

One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God (Mt 4:4)...

...Satan realized he was not dealing with the **amateurs** like Adam and Eve. So, he upped the ante, pulling another **Scripture quote out of his hat** to convince Jesus to make a showy display of **his** divine power:

“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you’ and ‘with their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.’” (Mt 4:6)

Jesus countered with yet **another** Scriptural quote to fend off the Devil's attack and to reinforce his own commitment to his Father's will.

“Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.’” (Mt 4:7)

Finally, Satan offered **wealth, power** and **honor** to Jesus, if only Jesus would worship him.

At this, Jesus said to him, “Get away, Satan! It is written: ‘The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.’” Then the devil left him and, behold, angels came and ministered to him. (Mt 4:10-11)

Where the Devil succeeded in diverting Eve’s focus from **God** to *self*, he failed against Jesus, because Jesus considered **nothing** but his Father’s will. He kept **his eyes and his heart on his Father**, and the Devil’s **diversions** and **misdirections** failed miserably.

Jesus knows that **we** are at an even greater disadvantage against the Devil than were Adam and Eve, because **they**, at least, started out in a state of perfect relationship with the Father before the Devil attacked. **Their** Original Sin has been passed on to us, and even though this **Original Sin is forgiven at Baptism**, its effects remain with us throughout our life, leaving us limping like an injured animal begin stalked by a wild predator in the nearby weeds. But God does not **leave** us in this vulnerable condition to fend for ourselves.

That’s why the he gives us the season of Lent with **three particular weapons** for the Spiritual Battle—**prayer**, **fasting** and **almsgiving**. If we use these weapons well, we can defend ourselves against the **Devil’s cheap parlor tricks** which he uses to get us to take our eyes off of **God’s love** and to focus on *our lusts*.

So, when we fast, we **voluntarily** deny our appetites. We say no to self, so we can say yes to **God** and to our **neighbor**. We turn **away** from self by fasting and **toward** God through *prayer*. We turn **away** from self by fasting and **toward** our neighbor through *almsgiving*. And, by doing so, we more fully comply with Jesus **dual commandment** to love God and neighbor. Against this self denial aimed at love, the Devil’s temptations are as ineffective as Nerf Darts against a 6-inch steel wall.

Knowing how to use **prayer**, **fasting** and **almsgiving** to keep focused in the right direction is not magic.

It’s love for God and neighbor that makes the Devil...

Disappear!