

S. MILWAUKEE SERMON - FEB. 17

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, THE SON AND THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The Second Sunday of Lent in our Church is dedicated to the memory of the expulsion of the first man and first woman from the Garden of Eden. According to the Book of Genesis, the Lord forbade man to "eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." Defying the command of God meant death, and the first man knew this well, since the Lord had told him outright "for in the day that you eat of it [the tree of the knowledge] you shall die."

Adam and Eve knowingly and willingly worked against the command of God, a major sin, and brought upon themselves the bitterness of death. Man was driven out of the Garden of Eden and the divine hosts kept him out.

This colorful and primary version of the fall of man in the Genesis teaches us something about our human nature, namely that the so-called "original sin" is a part and parcel of our nature not because of a flaw in the creation of man, but because of our own choice. That choice exposed man to all kinds of sins and spiritual afflictions as well as to the snares of the evil one.

The curtain that covers the main altar of the Church and the smaller curtains that cover side altars and holy pictures will remain closed throughout the entire Lenten period, until the Easter eve. The covered altar, or the apse, is symbolic of the Garden of Eden, which was declared off limits to Adam and Eve as the cherubim and a flaming sword guarded the way to the tree of life.

The gates of the Garden of Eden were closed before the progeny of Adam as well. The closed altar reminds us of that hopeless situation. Despite the revelations and commandments of God in Old Testament times, mankind did not break away from sin and the Garden of Eden remained closed before them.

Unlike the people of the Old Testament times, we are very fortunate to know that the mercy of Almighty God is on us and that salvation is possible for the scion of Adam. But Man had debased - and could still now debase - himself to such an extent and fall into such an abyss of sin that no human intervention could save him. For example, no creature in the animal kingdom save for man has ever threatened the extinction of its own specie and the annihilation of the world. Only a divine act or intervention could save man from his folly and restore him to his former state of grace. That act or intervention took place some two thousand years ago and we were given hope. Unlike the first time when Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden and they as well as their progeny found the gates of the Garden closed before them, ensuing the Resurrection of Christ the Church showed us the way to the Garden of Eden. If on the one hand the veiled altar is a reminder of Paradise lost, on the other hand it is the symbol of Calvary and hope for salvation. The lenten period is designed to give us the opportunity to repent for the sins we have committed and to cleanse our souls in order to become worthy of "tasting the sweetness of the Lord's commandments," as our Holy father St. Nerses Shnorhali states in the hymn dedicated to the Second Sunday of Lent and the concept of expulsion of man from Eden.

Hope for everlasting life is the first step to faith, which is victory over death, and to the royal road leading us to Eden. We Armenian Christians believe that the Garden of Eden is on the face of this earth and it is the Church. The Garden of Eden is where man and God live in close proximity. A small community such as yours must make every effort to stay within the boundaries of this Eden in order to receive the spiritual nourishment you need. The Armenian Church is the Mother of every Armenian. The Second Sunday of Lent should be a special occasion for the members of this parish to make the right choice and remain inside Eden. Praying together always and participating in the Divine Liturgy will bind you together as brothers and sisters. You must make a special effort to bring back to this Garden all those Armenians who stay

away from the Church. You all will surely agree with me that the Armenian Church services and traditions, the Divine Liturgy, the fellowship and the warmth of an Armenian gathering are special experiences we all cherish and need. So, why should our children, the youth, our relatives and friends who are not churchgoers be denied the opportunity to experience all of these wonderful things? As Armenian Christians it is a part of our obligation to involve others in the Church. The greatest good that you can do to a fellow Armenian is if you become the cause of his salvation, which is possible only through the Church. Let us see to it that neither we nor those dear to us remain in a state of expulsion. We have the choice to enter the fold. Prepare yourselves over the next several weeks to repent, greet with joy the Holy Resurrection and receive the redeeming body and blood of the Saviour. Amen.