

1 Lent, Yr. A
March 5, 2017

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

If we hold the readings from Genesis and Matthew together we get a picture of the ways in which human beings can respond when faced with temptation. And, in both cases, these aren't ordinary run-of-the-mill temptations, but instead the deepest and most elementary temptation there is: the temptation that results from the realization that they are mere creatures and NOT God. Each of us faces that temptation, although we might not put it into those words. On the deepest level, it's the choice we make about our lives once we really get that we are not in control, once we get that we're the finite creatures and not the Creator. And when we get that, we have one of two choices – we either rebel and set ourselves up as RIVALS of God, as Adam and Eve did in that first reading, or we trust God as a loving father and try to be obedient to his will, as we see Jesus doing in the Gospel. And In the Romans reading, Paul says quite directly that the choice made by Adam and Eve brought death but the choice made by Christ brought redemption and life.

Look first at the Genesis reading. Scripture scholars tell us that the first 11 chapters of Genesis may be the most important chapters in the entire Bible, because they set out the basic theology – that the world is created out of love, by a God whose desire is that humans will find their delight and comfort in God's care and promises. They also tell us that God wants humans to freely choose to obey and love him, but that our responses are a bit of a mixed bag – sometimes we manage faithful obedience, but often we respond in stubborn defiance.

That first reading, the account of that first defiance, is sometimes cited as an account of original sin. And through the years, that sin has been described (quite wrongly) as having to do with sexuality and, more correctly, with being about disobedience. But, more interesting, I think, is recent scholarship which looks at this text as a reflection on our anxiety-ridden lives. In fact, rather than talking about original sin, some theologians talk about ANXIETY as the pre-condition for sin – the condition that pre-disposes us to sin in the first place. It's anxiety and the fear that accompanies it that makes us selfish and greedy and that makes us vulnerable to those serpents of temptation that show up in our lives.

Both readings have a similar structure, which I think can help us to see a pattern that can illuminate our own choices. In both cases, there's God's gift at the beginning – whether it's the good creation and the Garden in Genesis or the giftedness that Jesus has discovered in himself when he is baptized in the Jordan and then comes up out of the water to hear God saying – this is my beloved son. So it begins with God's gracious gift – for them and for us. And that gift, in both stories, is followed by the freedom to choose how to respond – whether with obedience or rejection.

We see one human response in the Genesis story. There's the gift of the Garden and there's freedom, but it's not unlimited – it's OK to eat of every tree EXCEPT just this one. Mark Twain, in commenting on this passage said something to the effect that it all happened because Adam was just human – that explains it all, he said. He didn't want the apple for the apple's sake, he

wanted it only because it was forbidden. God's mistake, said Twain, was in not forbidding Adam the serpent – then Adam would have eaten the snake and we would all have been fine!

So there's a gift, but there's a limit. And that's the first problem. Because the fact that there's a limit means, right off the bat, that we aren't in charge. That we're dependent, contingent. And while we could say that that engenders resentment, I think it's also right to say that the minute we know we aren't in charge, we feel anxiety. How do I know things will be done MY way? How do I know I'll be OK? How do I know God really has my best interests at heart? Why should I listen, or more important, why should I TRUST? So, there's the first move – anxiety comes from doubting that God will take care of us and that anxiety is followed by the sin that we commit when we try to secure our own well-being without reference to God.

The dialogue between Eve and the serpent is pretty interesting. If you read the whole passage carefully, you'll note that God begins by saying (and note that Eve isn't there when He says it) that they could eat of every tree, except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. So the serpent shows up and questions Eve in a way that just slightly alters what God said by saying DID GOD SAY YOU SHALL NOT EAT FROM ANY TREE IN THE GARDEN? The rephrasing is just twisted enough so that it makes God's command seem arbitrary and unreasonable. That's the first move. Eve misses that but then makes an interesting move of her own. Instead of simply saying, "Actually, I wasn't there, you'll have to ask Adam," she takes what she must have heard from Adam and exaggerates it – we can eat of the trees, but not the one that's in the middle, because God said that if we TOUCH it, we'll die. And that exaggeration gives the serpent his opening – NO, of course you won't die, he says. In fact, just think about it, the only reason God doesn't want you to eat of that tree is because he wants to keep you down, to keep you subservient, he wants to limit your freedom, he wants to forbid your enlightenment. How can you let anyone tell YOU what's good or evil? Come on, you can make up your own mind. There are a number of things I'd like to point out here – one is totally relevant to our age of what used to be political spin and now seems to have gone beyond that to outright lying. The point is that telling the truth, being careful with language, really matters. And the second is the appeal to pride, which reminds one of Nietzsche – that the *ubermensch*, the over-man, is beyond good and evil, beyond the common herd, capable of making his own morality. And how human this all is – in the misunderstanding, in the rationalization and the distortion to serve our own self-interest – in the refusal to let God be God and accept that we are human. So, in this story about how humans operate, we can see ourselves. To go back to the anxiety analysis, scholars suggest that it's our fear of vulnerability that drives this. If I can decide it myself, and don't have to trust you, God, I'll be like a god myself and I'll order my universe in the best possible way. While God is asking us to surrender to his love for us and to trust him, we seem to prefer trying every possible way to avoid that so that we can remain in the driver's seat.

These are pretty heavy existential questions and I think we all need to consider them carefully. But, but by way of contrast, let me share the story of a 4-yr old who had heard about temptation in Sunday School and wanted to talk about it with his Mom, who asked him if he knew what temptation was. "Yes," he said, "it's like we're in the grocery store and you and Dad are in one aisle and I'm in another with the candy and the devil whispered that I should take some. The Mom, knowing that the analysis we all just went through would be a bit much for a 4-yr old, just

played his question back: OK, if we were in our aisle and you were alone in the candy aisle and the devil said you should take some, what would you say back? She said he got a genuinely sweet smile on his face and without hesitating said, "Oh, I'd say thank you very much!" So perhaps there are innocent responses to temptation.

Turning to Matthew for a minute, though, we can see that Jesus' temptations were much more complex. On one level, he's faced with the very human temptations: will I have enough to eat? Will I be safe? Can I grab enough power so I can have things my way? But his temptations go deeper too because he's just come from the Jordan having heard himself declared God's loving son. His temptations are about what that means. He's been chosen, he's special. In our human way, wouldn't we interpret that to mean that we'd get special treatment, special protection, special status – more power, more influence, more attention? But somehow Jesus knew that to be the beloved one, the chosen one, meant instead to be the one who reveals the face of God by loving and serving without limit.

It's interesting to compare Jesus' experience with that of Adam and Eve. They too were children of God – the question in both instances (and it's still the question for us) is what kind of child are you going to be? Adam and Eve set themselves up as God's rivals, they wanted to push God out of the way, they want to have the power, to be in control. Jesus' response is the opposite. He's not going to opt for special favors or protection or power – he's going to remain as God's child and refuse to become God's rival.

These are all central human questions. As we enter this period of Lent when we're asked to contemplate these questions, here they are, rephrased somewhat by Frederick Buechner:

If you had to bet everything you have on whether there is a God or whether there isn't, which side would get your money and why?

Why you look at your face in the mirror, what do you see in it that you most like and what do you see that you most deplore?

If you have only one last message to leave to the handful of people who are most important to you, what would it be?

Of all the things you have done in your life, which is the one you would most like to undo? Which is the one that makes you the happiest to remember?

Is there any person in the world, or any cause that, if circumstances called for it, you would be willing to die for?

If this were the last day of your life, what would you do with it?

And then he says, "To hear yourself try to answer questions like these is to begin to hear something not only of who you are, but of both what you are becoming and what you are failing to become. It can be a pretty depressing business all in all, but if sackcloth and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter may be at the end. (*Whistling in the Dark.*) Amen