

1 Lent, Yr. A

March 1, 2020

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7, 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 they are the deepest and most elementary of temptations: the temptation that results from the realization that the person being tempted is a creature and not the Creator. Each of us faces that temptation, although we most likely wouldn't use 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 are finite creatures, that we are not God. And once 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 God's 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 readings. 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 – the world is created out of love, created 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. Through the centuries, that sin has been variously described. Some thought the sin had to do with sexuality, which is quite wrong when you read the text. Some thought it was more about disobedience, for which a good case can be made. But more recent scholarship looks at this text not as original sin, but rather as a reflection on the fact that we are prone to anxiety. And that anxiety sets us up for sin.

It's the pre-condition for sin. It's our anxiety that makes us selfish and greedy and vulnerable to all those serpents of temptation that show up in our lives.

Both the Genesis and the Matthew reading have a similar structure, and they help us see a pattern that can illuminate our own choices. In both cases, there's God's gift at the beginning – whether it's the gift of the good creation and the Garden in Genesis, or the giftedness that Jesus has discovered in himself when he is baptized in the Jordan, when, coming up out of the water, he hears God saying, "This is my beloved son." So it all 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 comments on this passage and said something to the effect that it all happened because Adam and Eve were just human – that explains it all, he said. They didn't want the fruit for the fruit's sake – they only wanted it because it was forbidden. God's mistake, he said, was in not forbidding them the serpent – then they could have eaten the snake and we would all have been fine.

So there's gift, but there's also a limit. And that's the first problem. Because the fact that there is 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 not that God begins by saying (and

remember Eve wasn't there when God 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 that she wasn't there and the serpent should ask Adam ( who's standing right there, by the way), she takes what she had 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 an 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 and evil? Come on, you can make up your own mind!

Can't you just hear it? There are a number of things to think about here. One is totally relevant to our age – to what used to be political spin and to what has moved on to outright lying. The point is that telling the truth, being careful with language, really matters. And the second thing to note is that appeal to pride, which reminds me of Nietzsche – that the *ubermensch*, the over-man, is beyond good and evil, beyond the common herd, capable of making his or her 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 to accept that we are human. So, in this story about how humans operate, I think we can see ourselves. It's wrapped up in our failure to trust: if I can decide it myself, and I don't have to rely upon you, God, I'll be like a god myself and I'll order my universe in the best possible way for ME. While God is asking us to surrender to his love for us and to trust, we seem to prefer trying every possible way to avoid that so that we can remain in the driver's seat.

On one level these are heavy existential questions, but on another, we all know all about this. We all know about the temptation to see freedom not as a life-giving boundary keeping us safe, but as a barrier, unnecessarily holding us back. While I was writing this, I was reminded of being at the Grand Canyon when the kids were fairly young. We were standing at the edge of one of those chasms, you know, one with a drop of thousands of feet. Our middle daughter, who was about 4 at the time, was standing between her father and me and all of a sudden she reached up, took hold of the top rail of the rather skimpy fence on the edge and swung herself out over the chasm. We both saw her at the same time, both had the sense to wait until she came back over solid ground and both grabbed her at the same time. Her dad put one end of his belt around her waist and held the other. She was highly incensed that we had curtailed her freedom. We were impervious to her being incensed!

Let's look at Matthew's reading for a minute. Jesus' temptations were a lot 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 to that I can have things my way? But his temptations differ because he's just come out of the Jordan having heard himself declared God's son. His temptations are about what that means, about what kind of Messiah he will be, about what his leadership will look like. He's been chosen, he's special. In our human way, wouldn't we interpret that to mean that we'd get special treatment, that we'd get whatever we want, that we were above the rules? Special protection, special status, more power, more influence, more attention? But somehow Jesus knows that to be the chosen one, the beloved one, means instead to be the one who reveals the face of God by loving and working to make God's will for the world a reality. The gift is given, not for one's own benefit, but to further God's plan.

It's interesting to compare Jesus' response with that of Adam and Eve. They too were children of God – and 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 in defiance of God, set themselves up to be God's rivals. They wanted to push God out of the way, to have the power, to call the shots. Jesus's 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.

This Lent, it might be a good exercise to go back and think about God's purpose in creating the world. Genesis tells us that God's intent was a creation that started in goodness and would continue to grow, with the cooperation of his creatures, in love, unity and flourishing for all. But Genesis also tells us that we're pulled in two directions: toward that goodness, but also toward selfishness that results in chaos, conflict and suffering. Now in Lent, we have these six weeks and we can use them as an opportunity to focus on how we're doing and how, with God's help, we can do better. Amen.