

“Temptation Test”

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1 Lent Year A (1 March 2020) Genesis 2:15–17, 3:1–7 ; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12–19; Matthew 4:1–11

Temptation and Sin. They go hand in hand, don't they? At least for us mere mortals! We pray for strength every day... “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” But sometimes it's just so very hard not to stray.

A minister told his congregation, “Next week I plan to preach about the sin of lying. To help you understand my sermon, I want you all to read Mark chapter 17.”

The following Sunday, as he stood to deliver his sermon, the minister asked for a show of hands. He wanted to know how many had read Mark 17. Several went up. The minister smiled and said, “Wonderful! I will now proceed with my sermon on the sin of lying. And by the way, Mark has only sixteen chapters.”

Why did some of those folks in the story I just told feel the need to lie about reading Mark 17, especially in church? My word! Were they trying to avoid embarrassment? To curry the minister's favor? To show off? Why were other folks content to admit to not reading the passage? Had they looked it up for themselves and were, with the minister, amused (or shocked) by those that raised their hands? Perhaps some hadn't opened the bible at all and were just being truthful. We can't see into everyone's hearts, but we can see into our own hearts. And that's where we must begin this journey.

This morning we're paying another visit to the Garden of Eden, catching up with Adam and his new bride Eve. Remember them? Our most ancient ancestors that God created out of the dust? -- After working for five eternal days separating the night from the day and the waters from the land, lighting the skies with the Sun and the Moon and the stars, bringing forth multitudes of plants and fruits and animals, God chooses to create humankind in his own image... to give them dominion over the whole earth, to be fruitful and multiply. The Lord God himself forms them from the dust of the earth and breathed into their nostrils, even into our own nostrils, the breath of life... an act of original love.

As we arrive, Adam and Eve are happily tending the garden, delighting in God's favor in paradise, freely eating of the fruit of every tree in the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, as God commanded. Excited to show us the garden, Adam offers a stroll through the grounds and we enthusiastically accept his invitation. Eve tells Adam to give us the best tour ever and off we go. And there before us are the most wonderful sights... huge varieties of trees filled with magnitudes of birds of every color and size, crystal lakes and tumbling streams where lions and lambs drink shoulder to shoulder, teeming with fish and crabs and salamanders, majestic waterfalls and savannahs of silver and purple and green abounding with herds upon herds of wild animals of every kind, all under a glorious azure sky brushed with deep crimson and dazzling gold where the sun is setting beyond the snow-capped mountain peaks in the distance. All a gift from God, the wonder of creation freely given to us as its stewards.

Back now at the first family's abode, Eve is not to be found and so we thank Adam for the wonderful tour and with our best wishes to Eve, bid him adieu. Unbeknownst to us, while we've been away Eve

has been tempted by the crafty serpent, Satan in disguise, who convinces her to go against God's one command, even though she knows better. The temptation to be like God is too great and she has not the will to resist, so she eats the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and then gives the fruit to Adam, who neither can resist the temptation, and he eats too. And just like that, so suddenly and so sadly, creation groans and original love is spurned for original sin.

And isn't that the way temptation is? We know it's wrong, that there's a better way, but temptation can be just so ... well ... tempting! Or irresistible. Sometimes it takes us so quickly we don't even know it's happened until it's too late. Other times, it just keeps after us. You've heard it said that opportunity only knocks once, but as someone once said, "Opportunity may only knock once, but temptation leans on the doorbell."

We make up excuses and justifications, but if you're like me, it's a constant struggle. Why are the devil and the angel sitting on each of my shoulders? Thank God for the angel. But why can't I get the devil to just leave me alone? I try, believe me I do. I am so thankful that Lent comes once a year... and often just in the nick of time. I **need** the spiritual discipline. And I **need** to give up things that are dear to me. I'm not sure if I've found the right stuff over the many Lents that I've fasted. This year it's alcohol and sweets, as it so often seems to be. The discipline of denying myself simple pleasures that I truly enjoy is helping me to focus on other pursuits... on reading and praying, and trying to practice and proclaim my faith more outwardly.

There's a story I like to tell about my job as a county mail courier where I developed a lighthearted relationship with Isabel, a nice lady that worked at the front desk at Phil Bolen Park. Usually close to lunch time when I stop by, she's often munching on something. This day it was cookies and she offered me one. Girl Scout Samoas... mmm, my favorite! I almost accepted her gift but remembered, just in time, that I was giving up sweets for Lent, which I told her. "Good for you!" she exclaimed. "I'm giving up liver."

Jesus told us in our Ash Wednesday readings that where our treasure is there will our hearts be also. I hope that what I'm giving up for Lent are not my True Treasures! I don't think Liver is Isabel's treasure either. As a matter of fact, I bet she doesn't even like it. But she did make me laugh, which pleased us both no end. C.S. Lewis said, "No man knows how bad he is until he has tried very hard to be good." Those are the waters I try to navigate during Lent. Struggling to recognize temptation and to avoid falling into sin. Searching for true treasures, my creation rediscovery. Can we return to the Garden? I don't know, but we should never stop trying!

Should we be giving up something for Lent that we already dislike? Like liver? That probably won't do us much good. Should we be giving up our true treasures? Certainly not! But I offer a third possibility... that we try giving up something that we truly dislike... about ourselves. A temptation we have a hard time resisting. An anger that we have a hard time controlling. Mean thoughts that we may blurt out without thinking.

If we return in our hearts to the wonder and beauty of creation, before sin came into the world, we can find our way through the darkness. As I read in the weekly devotional titled "Awesome God", from The Evangelism Institute, "God is infinite, eternal and unchanging. The ever expanding universe, the

intricate circle of planets and suns and meteorites and galaxies and black holes, the careful work of birth and growth, the power of gravity and monsoons and earthquakes, the articulate songs of whales and children and great composers, the beauty of deadly mountains and flowers along highways - all of these and more beyond counting point to our wonderful and awesome Creator. God is infinitely beyond all and anything that you or I could ever dream. God is glorious. God is God.”

Josette urged us in her Ash Wednesday homily to “re-treasure the things of our life that are of ultimate importance, the people and things that are of infinite value. Failing to treasure is what lies behind the pain, brokenness, dysfunction, violence, and sin that too often fill our lives and world.”

To help us resist temptation, control our tempers, expunge evil thoughts, let’s use “this Lenten season as a time of re-treasuring. A time to re-treasure people and relationships, to re-treasure justice and compassion, to re-treasure love, forgiveness, hope, and beauty.”

Jesus was tired and hungry and alone when he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. And what temptations they were! Temptation that get right to the heart of where someone weaker than our Lord would have given in. But Jesus drew on the Word of God, which he treasured in his heart, not only to resist, but to find release. He trusted that there was a higher calling awaiting him. One far better than the temporary pleasures to be gained by giving in to earthly temptations. Saving himself, as Paul said later, for “an act of righteousness [that] leads to justification and life for all. For just as by one man’s disobedience [we were all] made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience [we] will be made righteous.”

Our own Bishop Susan said in her Lenten letter, that Lent is a time to “intentionally enter the winter wilderness of our own hearts to look for the blossoms there. And they are present -

- in the gift of forgiveness that feels like quenching water on a sin-parched soul,
- in the simple yet extraordinary healing of wounds that happens little by little, day by day,
- in the kindness of a stranger,
- in the reconciliation that comes when we dare to listen without judgment and speak without reproach.

“The wilderness of Lent overflows with life,” like in the Garden before original sin. “As we give up old practices and take on new ones, we can see life as surely as we notice blossoms on the once-dormant earth. The wilderness of Lent is a training ground for life, shaping us to see it all around us, preparing us to receive the gift of abundant life from God who created us and loves us fiercely.

“Don't be afraid to go to the inner wilderness you have long been trying to avoid. Don't be afraid to enter the places of fear or longing or pain that you've long been trying to ignore. Signs of life and promises of hope are already there, just waiting for you to find them. God is already there, too. And God, the author and giver of life, will never abandon you.”

And to that can we all say... Amen!

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