

Creation Rediscovered by Tim Hall, Good Shepherd Episcopal Church, Bluemont, VA

1 Lent Year A (5 March 2017) 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. Thankfully, Jesus shows us another way. More on that later, but first...

*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."*

In Education for Ministry (EFM) we often studied biblical passages (or even current life situations) in the theological context of Creation, Sin, Judgement, Repentance, and Redemption. In this homily I'll be focusing on **creation** and **sin**, especially the sin that results from giving into temptation and the creation that results from overcoming temptation.

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.

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 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 and pastries. The discipline of denying myself simple pleasures 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.

*When I was out delivering the mail the other day I stopped in at Phil Bolen Park where I've developed a lighthearted relationship with Isabel, the nice lady that works the front desk. 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... 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 ply during Lent. Struggling to recognize temptation and 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!

So why does God allow the devil to tempt us? It may surprise you that God uses the devil. At any moment God could banish Satan, but he does not do so. Temptations have a purpose in God's plan. Even Jesus experienced temptation. As we read in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus was "led by the spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil." That's an amazing statement... **The Spirit led him - in order for the devil to tempt him**. As St. Augustine of Hippo wrote, "Christ made us one with him when he chose to be tempted by Satan." Temptations must and do have a purpose.

Jesus was tired and hungry. Why wouldn't he be? After all, he had been traipsing around in this desert place – this wilderness – for who knows how long? Days... Weeks, even. It had been a time of focus, of resolution, of preparation. It had to be. He needed to feel isolated from his parents and friends. He had to endure the raw elements of the wild. He must endure the biting hunger from his fasts. For this isolation, these harsh elements, this hunger would only be a foretaste of the Cross that awaited him.

It was dizzying to consider where he had been just days ago. Walking gladly into the Jordan, the swirling cool water (***water...***) enveloping him, as he approached his cousin, John. John knew him for who he really is. It was John who questioned if it was even proper that a lowly, disheveled prophet should baptize the Spotless One. Yes, it must be done.

And then there was *The Moment*.

The heavens opened, the Spirit descended and the Voice of the Father was heard. Affirming. Reassuring. Anointing.

Peace. It was utter Peace.

But now, Jesus heard another voice. And suddenly, the bitter wind, the tearing thorns, the gnawing ache deep in his stomach returned with a vengeance. With this voice, he was sharply thrust back into the desert.

***“If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread.”***

Surely, you have sacrificed enough, the voice excused. A man has to eat! It is a trifling act toward a good end. Eat. Break your fast. Sate your appetite. Allow yourself some *pleasure*. *You deserve it*.

But the God-man responded,

***“It is written: ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.’”***

In a moment, still reeling from the vanishing, unreachable image of bread, he found himself standing atop a perilous Temple parapet.

***“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.’”***

Clearly, the Tempter assured, the Scripture itself tells us of your *power*. Show me. Prove yourself. Humble me with your might. Go on, do it. ***Do it.***

But the Christ answered,

***“Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.’”***

And then the Great Deceiver sought to stun him. You Jesus, from that poor, lowly, undignified Galilean slum, you can have all of this: kingdom upon kingdom pledging proud and triumphant allegiance to you. Imagine the limitless *wealth!* Consider the boundless *honor!* Isn't that what you *deserve?* Isn't that the kind of faithfulness you seek? Isn't that only fitting for the King that you are? There is no need to suffer

for these people when you can own them, possess their wealth and bask in their accolades... and it is all yours for one small, inconsequential price.

***“All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me.”***

And the Son of God replied,

***“Get away, Satan! It is written:  
‘The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.’”***

And with that, he was gone. The one who offered Jesus bread if he would only break his faithful fast to God. Gone. The one who offered him the exercise of power if only Jesus would use his Divine Gifts for prideful, self-serving purposes. Gone. The one who offered him worldly honor and counterfeit wealth if only Jesus would call Satan “Father”. Gone. The Devil offered it all: *Pleasure, Power, Wealth and Honor.*

And Christ said no. *He chose God.*

Only one man totally resisted temptation. Jesus alone experienced the full force of temptation. You and I are like plants that waver according the way the wind blows. But Jesus is like a mighty Oak. He alone has withstood the full power of temptation. The temptations occurred at the inauguration of Jesus public ministry so that - in his humanity - he could take power from those temptations.

We are weak, but each time we stand with Jesus, each time we resist temptation, we gain power. That power ultimately does not belong to us, but to God. A Sufi Master (*Sufiism is Muslim mysticism*), Abdullah Ansari, said, "If thou canst walk on water, thou art no better than a piece of straw. If thou canst fly in the air, thou art no better than a fly. But if thou canst resist temptation, thou canst conquer the universe." Genuine power, real strength, comes from resisting temptation by God's grace.

The power is real, but when we think it is our own, we set ourselves up for a big fall. God allows the devil to tempt us is to expose our real selves, so that we can recognize our own weaknesses. Temptation - especially falling into its sin and suffering its consequences - can be a powerful lesson in humility.

And when we give in to temptation, when we sin, we go it alone. We may feel that we are freeing ourselves from restraints, but in fact we are falling into bondage. The person who recognizes their powerlessness and entrusts themselves to a Higher Power becomes truly free. Furthermore, when we resist temptation, we gain strength.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (Roman, 4 BC – AD 65) admired by early Christians, who may himself have been converted by St. Paul, wrote, “We should every night call ourselves to an account: what infirmity have I mastered today? what passions opposed? what temptation resisted? what virtue acquired? Our vices will abate of themselves if they be brought every day to the shrift.”

Humility to see our own weaknesses, trusting in God to help us, gaining strength by God’s grace: these are the hallmarks of what we profit by being tempted by the devil. And Jesus showed us the way to turn this temptation to our advantage, to become true servants and to get one step closer to rediscovering the beauty and love of original creation: "The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve." It doesn’t get much more straightforward than that. May we have a blessed and holy Lent.

Amen.

Bibliography / Credits:

Red text: "Why Christ Needed the Wilderness (& So Do We)" by Tod Worner, February 10, 2016.

Full text may be found at: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/acatholicthinker/2016/02/why-christ-needed-the-wilderness-so-do-we/>

Blue text: "The Purpose of Temptation", author not given, 2011. Full text may be found at:

<http://stmaryvalleybloom.org/homilyfor1stlent-a.html>

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My additional note:

EFM theological reflection asks the following questions for each theological theme:

- Creation - What kind of world is this?
- Sin - What counts as negative in this world?
- Judgment - What calls us up short in this world?
- Repentance - What expresses a change of heart, mind, or action?
- Redemption - What brings healing and redemption in this world?

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