

Today is the first Sunday in Lent and we begin as usual in this season of the stories of Temptation. As Lent is a time for personal reflection and penitence, it's probably a good place to start, because we are all tempted, aren't we?

In the beginning God created the earth and everything in it, including Adam and Eve, and called them good. Adam and Eve lived in the garden of Eden and had everything they needed to live: food and shelter, animals and plants, and each other. God gave them only one restriction: don't eat from the tree in the middle of the garden, the tree of knowledge of good and evil, or they would die.

The implication is that without eating from this tree they would live forever, communing with God and each other in harmony with nature. A perfect life.

One day Adam and Eve are hanging out in the garden and the serpent approaches them. He is crafty, says the story, and he speaks to Eve: *you mean you can't eat from any tree in the garden?* I don't know if this is the serpent's opening line, but I imagine that the serpent and Adam and Eve had been having a general conversation about life in the garden which led up to this question. And Eve replies, *We can eat of any tree except the one in the middle of the garden; but if we eat of it or even touch it we'll die.*

And the serpent says, *Oh, you won't die. God just doesn't want you to have the knowledge of good and evil, because then you will be like God.* So Eve took the apple—it looked as if it would be good to eat and would have the benefit of making them wise. So Eve ate some of the fruit and gave some to Adam and he ate; and their eyes were opened and they became wise. Only wisdom wasn't what they expected, perhaps, because in their wisdom they realized that they were naked, and they felt shame, and they hid from God because they were ashamed and afraid.

It is the old, old story. We have all had parents or have been parents, and we know that our innocent children will one day grow out of that innocent state. And so we try to protect their innocence for as long as possible by making rules to keep them out of trouble and keep them pure and good for as long as possible. But it doesn't take long for them to want to explore their world and before we know it they're tempted to break one of our rules. Maybe the rule is don't run into the street; they don't understand as little children what can happen if a car would hit them. Then, they see a pet get hit, or a toy get run over, or perhaps they are hit or nearly hit themselves. That lesson is learned, but something is also lost—an innocence, a sense of freedom of moving about in the world, a belief that badness doesn't exist. A lack of understanding that life can change in a second, and some choices cannot be taken back.

We all have choices in our lives that we wish we had not made, I think. Actions we've taken that turned out to be bad for us or have hurt us or someone we love. We all have regrets, and while I believe that even our bad choices can work for good in the long run, when we make a mistake, when we allow ourselves to be tempted away from what is good and healthy for us into actions that hurt us or those around us we lose something, we might gain experience but we lose a purity of spirit that we have at birth. And each time we err we chip away at that purity and become less and less the simple beings we had been. For some of us this means becoming mean-spirited and cynical. For others it means not knowing how to relate to others in a healthy way.

For Adam and Eve it meant knowing that they were naked and being ashamed and hiding from God. And this is the real loss, I think—losing out on a perfect, complete, and whole relationship with their creator God, losing out on an innocence of spirit that didn't feel shame but only the goodness that God created them to be.

But God never stops loving God's creations. Even though the people are put out of Eden and become mortal, God never stops caring for them, never stops trying to repair the relationship with them, never stops trying to save them. Through the days of the flood, days of famine, days of slavery in Egypt; through times that the people turned away and made idols, followed lesser gods like Baal, grew more and more cynical and farther and farther away from God's good creation, God never stopped loving the people. God sometimes grew angry, as we do as parents or as our parents did with us sometimes; but God never stopped loving the people of God.

And eventually God decided to come to earth in human form, in the person of Jesus, who we call God's son but who we also believe was God in human form. In Jesus we have not only a divine savior but also a human example of how we are to live. Jesus was, as we see in Matthew, tempted just as we are tempted, to actions outside of God's intent for Jesus' human life.

After Jesus was baptized he was led by the Spirit, it says in Matthew, *to be tempted*. Why did the Spirit lead Jesus to be tempted? Was it so Jesus could be a show-off and make all of us mortals feel bad because we're not perfect as he is perfect? Was it so that God could experience temptation and know what it was like for human beings? Neither of these answers is satisfying, really. But it is important for us to know that Jesus was tempted and resisted.

As we read on the devil tempts, or tests Jesus in three ways: Jesus is hungry, so the devil suggests that Jesus make bread from stones. Jesus is human, so the devil suggests risking harm to himself to see if he will be saved by the angels. And Jesus is loyal to God, so the devil suggests that if Jesus becomes loyal to him Jesus will have rule over all of the earth.

It is interesting to note the exchange. The devil offers, and Jesus counters with a scripture verse. 3 times he does this: *One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God* (Deuteronomy 8:3), *Do not put your Lord God to the test*, (Deut. 6:16) and *Worship the Lord your God and serve only him*. (Deut. 6:13). All of these are from a part of Deuteronomy that tells about the Israelites wandering in the desert—a time that tested the Israelites and their loyalty to God. The tests come to the Israelites in 3 ways: hunger, security (rations of manna that are limited), and prosperity. Jesus was tested by hunger, security, and prosperity and power. In this way Jesus is linked to the people of Israel and to Moses once again, who led the people during their time of testing.

Jesus is a bridge that leads the people to God in a new way, a way that encompasses both law and prophets (as we saw last week), faith and action. Jesus was tempted and tested as Adam and Eve were tested, as the people of Israel were tempted and tested, and as you and I are tempted and tested. Not because God wants to play "gotcha" with us but so we will learn and grow. In this way it's important that we don't hear this story as "Jesus resisted temptation, you should too!" because, frankly, we're not Jesus. But by seeing that Jesus, son of God was tempted and tested as we are tempted and tested, we know that God has experienced what we go through practically every day; by seeing that God continues over the years to seek those who are lost, who make mistakes, who aren't *perfect* as we imagine perfect to be we know that we too are loved by God.

Of course, the story of Jesus in the wilderness gives us a framework for helping us when we are faced with choices, with doubt, with the reality of being human. Today we find often find ourselves feeling *famished*, not just physically hungry but spiritually and emotionally as well. Our response often is to try to fill that emptiness with material possessions, too much food or alcohol or drugs, with power-seeking behavior that leads us to try to dominate others, putting them down or shaming them because they are different than we are. Time and again, though, we find that while these things might temporarily make us feel whole or complete, they aren't a permanent solution.

When we look at the way that Jesus is tempted and tested in the wilderness, and look at how he was able to resist, we see that rather than relying on himself or allowing his hungers to lead him into destructive or unhelpful behavior, he relied on the word of God to help him resist the maneuvers of the devil. He quotes scripture, each time, each time calling on a verse that helps him—and us--remember when God was faithful. Now, memorizing Bible verses has kind of fallen out of fashion; but that doesn't mean it isn't still important. And we don't need to memorize the whole Bible to help; knowing a few key verses can go a long way. For example, a couple of my favorites are *All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to God's purpose*; and *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*—both verses that I remember when things aren't going my way. Of course most of us here have memorized the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm which can be a great comfort in times of sorrow. Many Psalms, in fact, are very good at helping us keep our faith strong—from *this is the day the Lord has made!* to *Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice!*

Yes, there are times when we'll be tempted and tested by life. And yes, sometimes we'll falter, as Adam and Eve did. And sometimes we'll pass the test as Jesus did. But the thing to remember is that, whether we fail or whether we pass, God loves us, just the same. So *let us give thanks to the Lord, for God is good! God's steadfast love endures forever!* Amen.