

THE (VERY) FIRST TEMPTATION(S)

Sermon, February 26, 2023

The First Sunday in Lent

Texts: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-6; Matthew 4:1-11, Romans 5:12-19

I've pointed out more than a few times over the years that in the Gospels the audible voice of God is heard only three times. On two of those three occasions, God speaks audibly from heaven and affirms, "THIS IS MY SON." Once was at Jesus' baptism and the other was at Jesus' Transfiguration, which we looked at last Sunday. It's as if God were saying on these two occasions, "Now hear this! This is important, if you get nothing else straight, get this direct from Me: THIS IS MY SON." The background for our lectionary Gospel reading from Matthew is that Jesus had just been baptized by John. Again, God's audible voice had spoken clearly from heaven at that baptism, "THIS IS MY SON." With the Voice still ringing in His ears, Jesus then heads off into the wilderness, and along comes the tempter saying, "IF you are the Son of God ..."

Now, I can imagine Jesus responding, "Seriously? C'mon, Mr. Devil. What do you mean, 'IF?' God just CLEARLY SAID I'm His Son. I don't need to test and/or prove it." And basically what Jesus goes on to say is that we were designed to live on and by every word that comes from the mouth of God, affirming that God's words are trustworthy, good and FOR our good. The mistake Adam and Eve made was to allow the tempter to do what he was trying to do with Jesus, to foster doubt about what God had CLEARLY SAID and then appeal to a desire that yearned to be filled. No, Jesus says there is something more important in life than just filling our bellies and satisfying our bodily desires ... and that is carefully heeding every word of God and THEN satisfying our desires accordingly!

The Old Testament reading is one of the world's best-known stories. Now, much of what I'm about to say I've said before as we've looked at this passage approximately five times over my years here; but some basic things just bear repeating ... there are important lessons here for all of us to get right. The Bible opens by attesting to God's role as the Creator, and how everything in His creation was deemed by Him to be good and beautiful ... including this Garden. Adam and Eve were forbidden only one thing. There was this certain tree in the center of the Garden, called the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. God told Adam he could eat fruit from any tree in the Garden ... except that one.¹ Now, note something many (but not all) people of faith have apparently and inexplicably missed over the centuries ... WHEN did God give this instruction? God gave it before He created the woman from Adam's side (before He served up the original Prime Rib Special). Adam was given this instruction before Eve entered the human race. Now, hold that thought.

Chapter Three begins, "Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden ... or you will die.' 'You will not surely die,' the serpent said. 'For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.'" Two quick things to note about this personification of evil, here ... or should I say this "reptilification" of evil. **First**, we are told he is the most crafty and sly of creatures, which means he's pretty slick. There's a sermon in itself here, but don't engage temptation in conversation! The seduction comes when we get caught up in a dialogue with evil, when we linger in its presence, looking for some kind of rationale or theological ethic which will "let" us do what the temptation is tempting us to do, even though we really do know better. We begin to wonder, "Did God really say that was wrong?" If Adam and Eve had only just walked away from this smooth Talker at that point and refused to linger there, human history would have been so very different! **Second**, note the tempter lies; in this account, he's literally a lying snake. In fact, Jesus later calls him "the father of lies." He tells Eve, "You will not die; in fact, you will become like God!" As if to imply, "God is keeping something from you, and wants to keep you in your place."

After all, who of us could resist such an offer, to be like God? Don't we like to play God? Don't we like being sovereign over our own lives? Don't we regularly inform God (directly or indirectly) how He should manage things? "Well God, this is the way I see it, this is the way I think it ought to be, this is what I want to do and this is how I want to do it." You may remember the old story about three patients at a mental hospital. The first insisted he was Napoleon Bonaparte. The second asked how he knew he was Napoleon Bonaparte. The first replied, "God told me!" The third patient responded, "I did not!" We laugh, but in a sense we are often that third patient! THIS is what is so "origin-al" about this sin. This is not the Original Sin because it is the first one committed; it is "origin-al" in that it is the root sin

¹ Edited out due to time constraints: "Of course, we know human nature ... if something is off limits, we tend to neurotically focus on it, rather than thinking about and enjoying the innumerable good things we are free to have or do. As Mark Twain wrote in *Puddinhead Wilson*, 'Adam was but human — this explains it all. He did not want the apple for the apple's sake; he wanted it only because it was forbidden. The mistake [God made] was in not forbidding the serpent; then Adam would have eaten the serpent.'" That would've taken care of things from the get-go!

where each of us goes wrong! This is the origin, the root, of all our destructive activity. Rather than *trust* God, we'd rather *be* God. Whenever seduction draws us into thinking we know better than God, into questioning what God has clearly said, that a precursor (*no pun intended*) which leads to all kinds of trouble.

Now, back to that "thought" I asked you to hold earlier. There's something I shared when we've looked at this passage before that has probably generated more favorable comments from the women in this congregation than just about anything else I've said in my twenty-six years here. Eve has been blamed since time immemorial for leading Adam into sin. But note how verse 6 reads: "*When the woman saw the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, WHO WAS WITH HER, and he ate it.*" A plain reading tells us Adam was **right there** with Eve during this diabolical encounter! Despite how this scene has been classically and traditionally interpreted in art, theology and literature, nothing in this text tells us Eve was alone. Adam was probably doing what so many husbands do at social gatherings, standing around quietly and letting his wife carry on all the conversations! Now remember, as we read in the previous chapter, Eve wasn't in the world yet when God told Adam not to eat of this Tree. Adam was given that directive *before* Eve was around. So, it's quite likely all she knows about this restriction is what Adam would have told her; she didn't get it directly from God, as did Adam. And now, when the serpent engages Eve in this temptation, Adam doesn't speak up, even though he is apparently **RIGHT THERE!** He does nothing to stop this; he stands mute while the tempter engages his wife in this wily and seductive conversation. If Adam would have manned up ... and I don't mean in the gender-specific sense of the word "male," I mean if he just would have been a man, a human being created in God's image, a principled person of honor and integrity ... he would have lovingly and firmly stepped in and/or spoken up and/or just gotten them both out of there. (*"Adam, are you a man or a mouse? C'mon, squeak up!"*)

But, Adam is silent. He is dumb, in both senses of that word! And dumb Adam apparently quietly watches as Eve takes the forbidden fruit and eats it. Remember, God told him he would die if he ate the forbidden fruit. It is only *after* Adam sees Eve is still alive that he takes a bite for himself! **What a guy!** Instead of acting like a man of honor and integrity by protecting and loving and keeping his wife, Adam apparently uses her as a guinea pig, a food tester, to test God's command! Maybe he's thinking, "*Let's first see what happens to her, then maybe I'll try it.*" So, Adam was apparently more than just a secondary accessory to the crime; if anything, his guilt is greater! I think that's why Paul tells us in our Epistle reading that sin entered the world through *one man*, not through *one couple*. Eve may have been "deceived" (*as Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2*), but Adam **deliberately chose** to disobey what he knew first hand to be God's clear directive. Seen in this light, his is the greater guilt. You can read later in Genesis 3 that when God later confronts Adam about this, Adam compounds his guilt by doing what many husbands ever since have tried to do ... he tries to put all the blame on his wife! Adam blames Eve, Eve goes on to blame the serpent, and as the saying goes, the serpent didn't have a leg to stand on. Seriously, though, I want to note just Who it is Adam tries to blame. It really isn't Eve. He blames *God*. He says to God, "*The woman You put here with me ... she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.*" In other words, "*So, God, this is YOUR fault. You ordered up this Prime Rib Special; if You hadn't put her here with me, I wouldn't have sinned!*" No, Adam! Our sin is not God's fault. He gave *you* clear instruction, and *you* disobeyed. He has given all of us the divine capacity and gracious privilege to make real and free and good choices; we are given the unalienable rights and responsibilities of freedom ... and He has also provided us good instruction by His Word on how to freely choose what is right and good and life-giving. No, Adam, we aren't to blame God for *our* actions. So as a result, they now knew good and evil, by first hand experience. More precisely, they now knew first hand the *effects* of evil; had they not taken of the fruit, they would have had the blissful life experience of knowing and experiencing only the good. They learned from bitter first hand experience that what initially appears good and beautiful and beneficial can, in fact, be really evil and ugly and destructive. But there is the heart of evil: it offers a lie for the truth and portrays the truth as a lie, and we become lost in a quandary of choices we are not well equipped to discern.

There is a second Garden of note in Scripture, a Garden we will visit toward the end of this Lenten season. It was here in the first Garden, here in Eden, where humanity first cried out, "*Not Thy will, but my will be done.*" The second Garden is Gethsemane, where a lonely figure cries out, "*Not my will, but Thy will be done.*" As we read from Romans, "*... just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.*" Through one man, Adam, sin and death entered the world, and we are heirs of that legacy. However, through another man, the second Adam, comes victory over sin and death. By faith, we are made heirs of that legacy as well. Jesus repeatedly faced the tempter and did not sin ... and on the cross, He gave Himself as an offering for us all. So now sin and death are no longer our only inheritance; in Jesus Christ we can be made heirs of life, eternal and abundant. Every Lenten season we commemorate the suffering and passion of our Lord that allowed us to inherit the best of both legacies ... we inherit the fullness of being made in God's image, and we inherit life, forever and abundant.

Thanks be to God for His great and gracious gift in Jesus Christ. Amen.