

Sermon – First Sunday of Lent

Scripture Texts: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11
Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *The temptation stories invite us to wrestle with questions about boundaries and trust. The way of Jesus is to trust God and to accept the boundaries on the use of power (that it should be not for domination but on behalf of others.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. What is the temptation?
 - a. So, here we are again – back in the wilderness with Jesus, facing temptation.
 - i. This is the reading every year for the first Sunday of Lent. And, this year, we get a bonus with the story of the temptation of Adam and Eve in Genesis.
 - ii. Perhaps these stories were chosen because the lectionary committee expects us to be facing temptation in Lent. As we heard on Ash Wednesday, it is traditional to prepare for Easter with a season of “self-examination and repentance”, of “prayer, fasting, and self-denial”, and of “reading and meditating on God’s holy Word.” Many of us give something up for Lent (repentance / fasting / self-denial) or take on some practice (prayer / reading / meditation), and these disciplines can be difficult. It can be tempting to break the commitments we have made.
 - iii. Is that the kind of temptation that our passages today are dealing with? Is this about the temptation to eat chocolate or to sleep in a few more minutes rather than waking for prayer?
 - b. Bigger questions (and bigger consequences?)
 - i. This week, we’ll be starting our Lenten Discussion Series on Tuesday evening – the third year of collaborating with the Root Quarterly team to wrestle with big and interesting questions in community.
 - ii. This year, we’ll be looking at how we (humans of all societies and cultures and eras) use stories to make sense of the world.
 - iii. Stories are much bigger than a record of historical events or a way of entertaining children; they are more than a source for good advice on resisting temptation. Stories help us to identify and wrestle with the big questions of existence, and to grasp truths that go deeper than mere facts.
 - c. In our Epistle reading from Romans, Paul is touching on one way in which these stories deal with big questions and issues.
 - i. In this reading, the Genesis story is where the whole human endeavor went off the rails. Adam and Eve disobeyed God, and so sin entered the world, infecting all of creation.

- ii. The only cure, then, comes through Jesus' resisting temptation and offering a perfect sacrifice: "just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous."
- iii. But, while this reading of these temptation stories has been very significant throughout church history, it has also been misused and abused. This reading has been the source of theology that has blamed women as the source of evil, that has condemned unbaptized babies to hell for being tainted by original sin, and that has made the cross to be an appeasement of an angry God.
- iv. Paul's reading of the text doesn't have to lead to such damaging theology, but it does leave me wanting to read these stories through a lens that isn't rooted in sin and guilt (especially because those terms aren't ever mentioned either of the stories!).

2. Questions of Boundaries and Trust

- a. Wil Gafney is a Biblical scholar, an Episcopal priest, and a Black woman – and I have found her explorations of the Biblical stories to be rich and challenging. In looking at the Genesis temptation story, Gafney suggests that we are dealing with questions about boundaries.
 - i. God has placed Adam and Eve in the garden, and has given them responsibility and power over the plants and creatures. But, there is a limit to that power – a boundary: there is one tree that they must not eat from.
 - ii. Now, anyone who has parented – or even interacted with – young children knows what happens when you establish a boundary. No sooner do we discover a boundary than we want to test it – to push against it. This story is speaking to that almost universal human trait.
 - iii. And, if we look at the temptation, it's not just a matter of the forbidden fruit looking more delicious than all the fruits they are allowed to eat. Rather, the serpent tells Adam and Eve that eating the fruit will make them like God.
 - iv. And that's where the problem comes in. To be like God is to have no boundaries – to have unparalleled power without limitations. But, some boundaries are necessary for human flourishing – for the proper functioning of a society. As we are seeing in the life of our nation right now, chaos runs rampant when humans refuse every boundary.
 - v. And, that is exactly what we see in the story. When Adam and Eve violate the one boundary that God gives them, relationship is broken. Shame springs up to separate them from each other and from God (for "they knew that they were naked"). And, throughout history, we see both shame and the lust for Godlike power wreak havoc on the whole of the human race – and through them on all of creation.
- b. So, the Genesis temptation story asks us to wrestle with whether we are willing to accept boundaries in order to flourish – or event to survive. And, in doing so, it raises a second question: who we trust to set the boundaries that we need?
 - i. Notice that the knowledge of good and evil is not a fundamentally bad thing! So, why would God establish this boundary for Adam and Eve? As I've heard people ask, why would God place the tree in the garden if they weren't supposed to eat of it?

- ii. Perhaps God knows that they are not yet ready for it? While the knowledge of good and evil is a good thing, I also know that it can be a dangerous thing. I've seen people convinced that they know the difference between good and evil, and they all too often feel justified in imposing their view on the world around them – through any means necessary.
 - iii. You see, we have a different term for the knowledge of good and evil. I think we call it wisdom – and it is something that can only be developed over time and in relationship with wise people. To try and seize the knowledge of good and evil quickly is always to fall into a kind of black and white thinking that reduces and does harm to the complexity of God's creation.
 - iv. So, perhaps God is right to forbid the tree for a time – perhaps Adam and Eve need to grow and develop before they will be able to digest this fruit. And, in a perfect world, Adam and Eve would have trusted God's timing - trusted that God wants the best for them.
 - v. But, the serpent undermines their trust in God. "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God..." Rather than trusting God, Adam and Eve come to suspect that God is just trying to control and suppress their potential power. And, so, they seek their own power, violating the boundary that was established for their own good.
 - c. (Recap) So, in this reading, the Genesis story asks whether humanity is willing to accept boundaries, and who we might trust to establish those boundaries.
 - i. It wrestles with the reality that we regularly reject even the boundaries which would protect us, and that we are unwilling to trust anyone to set boundaries – even our own creator.
 - ii. Instead, we have sought power over ourselves, over our neighbors, and over the whole of creation, causing untold harm.
 - iii. The garden of the Genesis story has been transformed into the wilderness where we find Jesus in Matthew's narrative. But, there is hope that Jesus might just provide an alternative out in the wilderness.
3. Building Trust and Bounding Power
- a. Before we get into the alternative offered by Jesus, I want to note, as I did last week, that this isn't some contrast that puts the Jesus of the New Testament above and against the Adam and Eve of the Old Testament.
 - i. The Jewish scriptures continue to wrestle with the same questions of boundaries and trust, and they provide numerous alternatives to Adam and Eve's destructive path.
 - ii. This isn't about Christians being better than Jews. But, as Christians, we look to Jesus as the fullest revelation of God's character, God's purposes for creation, and the alternative that God offers.
 - b. Looking at the story of Jesus' temptation, context matters.
 - i. This comes just after Jesus' baptism. He has just been publicly affirmed as God's chosen and beloved. He has committed himself to pursuing right relationship between humans and a) their fellow humans, b) their fellow creatures, and c) their Creator.

- ii. From this moment of calling and affirmation, Jesus is immediately led by the Spirit of God into the wilderness to be tempted. It seems that this temptation is necessary in order for Jesus to live into the calling and affirmation that he has received in baptism.
 - c. Jesus responds to the temptations with trust, restoring the relationship that Adam and Eve had with God in the garden.
 - i. In each temptation, Jesus counters by quoting Scripture (the word of God).
 - ii. He seems to be confident that God is present with him – and that God’s word and God’s ways exist for his good.
 - iii. And, that trust is ultimately confirmed in the sudden arrival of angels to care for his needs after the departure of the devil.
 - d. Moreover, when we look at the particular temptations, we see that they are each about the exercise of power.
 - i. Jesus is invited to turn stones to bread, to leap from the Temple, and to accept dominion over all the kingdoms of the earth.
 - ii. Like the fruit in the garden, none of these are fundamentally problematic. Later he will feed the crowds, later he will walk on water, and eventually he will be declared as Lord and Savior, at whose name every knee must one day bow.
 - iii. But, like with Adam and Eve, he is being tempted to seize this power immediately, rather than trusting God. He is tempted to seize power over himself by providing for his needs. He is tempted to seize power over his own people by spectacular deeds at the site which is the center of their society. And he is tempted to seize power over all creation through the worship of evil.
 - e. In rejecting these temptations, Jesus accepts boundaries on his power, and he expresses trust in God’s goodness. Moreover, when he does eventually exercise these powers, it is done on behalf of others, in ways that build trust and promote the welfare of all.
- 4. Our call this Lent:
 - a. So, we need not read these temptation stories as tools to resist the simple temptations connected with maintaining Lenten practices. Nor must we read them as cosmic theology about original sin and justification.
 - b. Rather, they can invite us to wrestle with big questions: what boundaries will we accept in order to flourish, and who do we trust to establish those boundaries?
 - c. And, especially in the story of Jesus’ temptation, we are invited into deeper trust of God’s goodness and of the boundaries that God provides.
 - i. These boundaries are not, as Adam and Eve came to fear, tools for God to control us.
 - ii. Rather, the boundaries of God call us to reject simple answers and the use of domineering power.
 - iii. Put positively, they lead us to use power in ways that build trust, that support ourselves and our communities, and that reflect God’s loving care for us and for all of creation.

Amen.