

The First Sunday in Lent
A Meditation on Temptation and Confession
(Genesis 3:1-7, Matthew 4:1-9)

Lent begins

The season of Lent begins for us in a place where we do not easily want to go. These tales from Genesis and Matthew, the first books of each testament, toss us into the churning, swirling currents of lust for power, unseemly sensuality, thirst for control, and raw human desire to want things to go my way. I find myself kicking against this. I don't want to go here. I don't want to root around in the muck of my own inner being.

To which the ancient writers might reply, in the words of an old preacher man, "if you don't like me stepping on your toes, then you better just move your feet!"

So today we acknowledge that temptation, or more hopefully "testing," is a real part of our lives. And like arch-types Adam and Eve, we all give in against our better judgment or best intentions, we all possess feet of clay, we all stumble and fall. The temptation to sin comes in many forms. It's both deeply personal and profoundly corporate. It's part of the individual's dark night of the soul. It's about the principalities and the powers. The temptation to sin leads us to manipulate and control others. It's about placing our desires first and foremost, to the disregard of others. When we yield to temptation we reject God's invitation to partner in kingdom life in this world—we say either, we will do thing our own way or we willfully abdicate responsibility.

Whether it's power and money, sex or control—we are all tempted to hold hands with Adam and Eve, and take a bite of that fine looking, juicy apple.

We are all tempted to take what is not ours to have. To yearn for what rightfully belongs to someone else. To lust for what will ultimately cause only harm. To control someone who is not ours to have. To seek to know what is best left unknown. To intervene when we would do best to keep a respectful distance.

But again, how delicious that apple looks. Surely no harm can come. We find our own modern spin on the ancient dialogue with its clever rationalizations and its pointed questions. Surely no harm can come.

What do temptation and testing reveal?

What does the reality of temptation and testing in our lives have to teach us? What can we learn? When we are tempted or tested, we learn a lot about ourselves. We begin to find out who we are at our very core, our essential inner essence. In the temptation stories from Genesis and Matthew there is an appeal for what would seem to be, at least on the surface, perfectly legitimate outcomes. What's wrong with more knowledge? What's wrong with a demonstration of God's miraculous power? What's wrong with more than enough food to eat?

Our challenge is to discern the times we live in to see and know the difference between a Godly nudge and a sinful pull. We usually associate sinful, harmful actions with seasons of desperation, times when lots of negative, ugly stuff has just piled up to where we break down and lose control, giving in to the worst. But it is equally true that it is from a respectable place of abundance that people make the sinful decisions that lead to the exploitation of many and the flagrant disregard for God's creation.

The Genesis creation story teaches us, as we repeat over and over again, that we are all created in the image of God. It's a reminder we should never grow tired of repeating, reminding us that the light of the Creator of all illumines each soul. I think the temptation of Adam and Eve in its own way serves a similar purpose. It reminds us that whether we live in a mansion or under a bridge, whether we lean to the left or lean to the right, whether we are lettered and cultured or if we wear our pants baggy and low-slung—we are all, at some fundamental level, all the same. Those temptations can finesse their way to our weak spots, no matter who we are.

No matter our station it's good and necessary to regularly stop by the confession booth. We aren't as private and dramatic as our Catholic friends, with their confessional booth. Confession has fallen out of favor in church circles. We don't want to commit the sins of the past, parading sinners before the gathered congregation so that they can publically confess. Some may think that we've overreacted in another extreme. But I'm sure you are aware that most every Sunday we observe at least a few fleeting moments, and sometimes a bit more sustained time, for confession. Sometimes it's part of a prayer, acknowledging our sins to God. Sometimes we observe confession through the form of a reading or litany. Sometimes it's in our singing. Now I admit that it's easy to glide over the words, to skate over the surface, never breaking the ice to dive into the cold waters of our own soul. But even if it is too often just lip-service, there's something about the regular repetition of "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" that is important for us to regularly, systematically, do.

At our Ash Wednesday service a few evenings we symbolically "poured out" our sins to God. Through litany and symbolic acts we called out our sins of pride, our sins of spineless accommodation, our sins of envy, our sin of being too self-absorbed to even care, our sins of anger, our sins of apathy, our sins of lust, our sins of passivity, our sins of greed, our sins of hesitation, our sins of gluttony, our sins of refusing to let go and relish pleasure, our sins of sloth, and our sins of overwork. It was very good, I felt, to just name all these things.

It's also important, I think, to acknowledge our own weakness as we consider our own testimony in the world. It's part of, as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, dealing with the "log in our own eye," before we turn to attend to the "speck" in our neighbor's eye.

The good news

The really good news in the midst of all this talk of sin, is that we are accepted and loved by God. In a few moments we are going to sing a Norwegian hymn, "In the stillness of the evening," that includes these words:

*My defeats loom large before me,
and I know the day now passing has been crushed to many pieces.
But as day draws to its closing
I surrender all my unrest to the One who is beside me.*

*God is greater than our conscience.
He who knows that I am helpless, from the weight of guilt will free me.
All my troubled thoughts are quiet
for I am, in all my weakness, still beloved and accepted.*

*Jesus Christ's own word and promise comes to me,
a gift of mercy: "All your sins are now forgiven!"
Thus the pieces lying broken
shall this very day be lifted into love's eternal wholeness.*

We finally do live with choices, with the freedom to choose which path we will take. This can be a scary place, fraught with complications. Sometimes we choose the broad and easy path that leads to destruction. But we live at the same time with the knowledge that God is merciful willing to extend grace to us, to make us both holy and whole again.

A second innocence

I'd like to end with a little excursion into exploring the meaning of nakedness in the Genesis text. And I don't mean to sensationalize or make light of something so raw and personal as our own nakedness.

The creation story paints this picture of the first people naked and blissfully at ease, a first innocence, if you will. But they choose, and they choose poorly, eating the forbidden fruit. And just like the serpent suggests, they see and know more than before. They see their own nakedness and they quickly stitch together some essential clothing.

A professor of ethics from Duke Divinity, Sam Wells, suggests this intriguing notion that nakedness exists in a triangle of meanings between vulnerability, sensuality, and innocence. But within this triangle of meanings things can get out of kilter. Vulnerability can be exploited. Sensuality can take too dominant a role. After yielding to the serpent's suggestion Adam and Eve found their innocence gone, sensuality was suspect, and, as Wells' puts it "the chill wind of vulnerability makes nakedness the symbol of mortality and fragility."

But right now, during this season of Lent, God calls us to a second innocence. God promises us that it can happen to you and to me. I realize this is an example that only works for some, but I will use it anyhow. Those who have been so fortunate as to have experience or know today a strong and healthy marriage know that the pleasing, second-nature, without a though mingling of sensuality and vulnerability can bring a renewed innocence. Here, in this place, one has the sure knowledge of being respected, cherished, and nurtured, just for who you really are.

And this, my dear friends, is what God offers us today. A second innocence. The opportunity to skip and to dance, to spread our arms out wide and to be meditative and still, to love joyfully and to mourn with those who suffer soulfully and passionately—and it can be so because finally and ultimately, we are cherished by our God's whose mercy is indeed wider than the ocean, and deeper than the sea. Amen.

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