

February 23, 2023
1 Lent, Year A
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Temptation From the Very Beginning

15The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. 16And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

3:1Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" 2The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" 4But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; 5for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. 7Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. First Reading: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

1[After Jesus was baptized, he] was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4But he answered, "It is written,

*'One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*"

5Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

*'He will command his angels concerning you,'
and 'On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'*"

7Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

8Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 10Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

*'Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.'*"

11Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him. Gospel: Matthew 4:1-11

We have prayed it countless times. We pray it before we receive Communion. We pray it when we do not have any other words to pray. I pray it in my pre-flight ritual as the plane accelerates and heads down the runway to take off. Each time without fail. I pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
 hallowed be thy Name,
 thy kingdom come,
 thy will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread.
 And forgive us our trespasses,
 as we forgive those
 who trespass against us.
 And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil.

Today, we are drawn to the last request: Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

Temptation. Evil. At the beginning of Lent, every year, we encounter these dueling realities we pray fervently to avoid and flee from. The scene each year is wilderness: 40 days and 40 nights Jesus spent alone, fasting in the hot and cold of an inhospitable place. We also revisit the garden of Eden, where it all began, so that we can begin the Lenten journey again.

The place and scope of wilderness may be different for each one of us. Some days I wonder if one our greatest temptation is distraction and the allure of busyness.

We are not all tempted by the same things, but a few hold eternal pull: food, if you are hungry; how far one can push our physical bodies and law of gravity, and the big one: power. To desire power, to possess and use it, to expand power and protect it at all costs.

Was temptation and evil always in God's plan?

The first reading from Genesis reminds us of the original Biblical story of Adam and Eve. How the crafty serpent tempted them to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Should we be surprised that the Bible located and named temptation at the very beginning? It is it seems our constant companion – always there. In popular imagination the fruit on the tree was an apple. Have you ever noticed the ubiquitous Apple computer logo? With a bite eaten from one side. A foretaste, perhaps, of the temptation of technology? Makes you wonder.

God says to Adam: You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." Perhaps we've discovered the first case of reverse psychology? Would Adam and Eve ever have even looked at the tree if God had not said: "don't eat from that one." Nevertheless, the tempter succeeds.

The same forces would meet up with Jesus much later. In the Gospel story we read that after Jesus was baptized, he was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by

the devil. God leading Jesus into temptation. What gives? And it can be a comfort to know that Jesus was tempted as we are, and he made it through. How did he do it?

The commentator Bishop N.T. Write notes that these three “like most temptations are good things that are being distorted. Bread is good. Jesus will later create a huge amount of it from a few loaves to feed hungry people. But should he do that just for himself – and just to satisfy himself that he is the ‘Son of God.’ No: Jesus will satisfy himself with what God has said, rather than any attempt to prove it.”

“Prove it,” may be one of the most seductive things we can say or hear. Prove that you know what you are doing, and you are not some imposter. Imposter syndrome is a real thing. Prove you can run faster, fly higher, excel, and even become more successful than your parents. Prove that you can do it all – juggle family demands, eat well, exercise, donate your time and money to good causes. Prove that you love me more than life itself. I can’t see God asking us to prove that we love God with our heart and mind and soul. Isn’t that what grace is for?

Let’s look again.

The first temptation by tempter, the Devil and Satan, was the alleviation of hunger. Food for a hungry soul.

The second challenges God’s ability or desire to intervene and save Jesus from physical harm. How much do we push our bodies to extremes relying on others or God to catch or rescue us? I cannot help of those who put others in danger when they set off for dangerous climbs or hikes unprepared or alone.

The third temptation is an offer of unlimited power. 8Again, the devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

Power, in large and public forms or in small private circles, is a factor in all our lives. Power may not always corrupt, but it certainly changes us. Power can cause one to forget about one’s beginnings and purpose. In conversations I have before couples get married, I always ask how they will handle their money and budget and who will pay the bills. Money, how it is managed and shared and controlled can be a place of power. Something to pay attention to.

In the face of each and every temptation to the hungry, tired and lonely Jesus, the answer was a loud and resounding NO.

Can it be so simple that the response to temptation in the story and in life is simply to say no?

Even as we pray “Lead us not into temptation” -- because we are human, we are led there on a daily basis. Many small, some big. We find ourselves in deep water and over our

heads – and these times come to all of us I believe -- listening to people and voices that are not in our best interest.

And in the stories we read, it seems to me that something important happens when temptation comes. There is no way that I know to avoid, detour or bypass them. We meet and face them, and they test and form us in ways we may never know. God knows this. God must.

Is God leading us all into such places and times to point us to something we need for the journey?

And the season we enter to prepare for Easter – to hear again the power of Resurrection to be proclaimed and celebrated, victory over death, new life and hope – these are days to consider how we navigate these times – our deserts, those dark nights of our soul, those self-doubts and inner voices that lead us nowhere good. Can we trust God enough to help us through? Can we hear God in the silence as we await answer to prayers?

The lessons of paradise and the wilderness are the same. Be careful. Listen to God. Don't be led astray. Don't forget what has been taught and shown. We can eat from any tree – life is abundant with choices -- just not that one. Maybe God is telling us that we can't "have it all" in this life – whatever that means.

There is nothing in this world off limits to God's presence.