

Sermon for Lent 1 on Temptation, Feb. 26, 2023

Well, today we have 2 great stories about temptation, we have Paul's somewhat convoluted explanation of how Adam foreshadows Christ, and we have a plea from the Psalmist to confess our sins when we commit them. So I thought I'd talk about temptation today. I expect we're all pretty familiar with temptation and I expect we sometimes resist it successfully and sometimes we yield to it. Maybe looking at it will help us resist more often.

Let's look at Adam and Eve first. They have been newly created and they are living in the Garden of Eden, where luscious fruit drops right into their hands. They are happy. And God tells them they can do anything they want, except they can't eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. He tells them if they eat that fruit or even touch the tree, they will die on that day. Well, of course they are attracted to it.

So one day when they're having a nice little walk, quite close to the forbidden tree, the snake says to Eve, "Too bad God won't let you have all this luscious fruit around here." And she says, "Oh, no, we can have anything we want, except that tree. When we eat that tree's fruit, we'll die." The serpent laughs. "You won't die," he says. "Your eyes will be opened and you will know good and evil. You'll be like God." Well. Eve looks at it. It looks delicious, and she finds the idea of being like God attractive. She takes some and eats it and she gives some to Adam, who is with her, and he eats it, too.

Well, the first effect of this is that they realise they're naked, and they feel ashamed, vulnerable. They were naked before but they didn't feel ashamed. The first effect of this great new knowledge of theirs is to bring a separation between them. They sew clothes out of fig leaves – I've always wondered why they chose small leaves instead of maple leaves or palm leaves, but that's by the by. Oh, and they don't die. The snake is right about that.

The next effect is that when they hear God coming for his evening stroll, they hide. They want to hide themselves from God. More separation. And when God asks them directly if they ate the fruit, they start the blame game. Adam says, "The woman you gave me to be with me gave me some." Not, "my wife." "Not "My darling Eve." "The woman you gave me." So he's not just throwing blame at Eve but also at God for bringing her around. And by the way, Genesis says he was with her. He did nothing at all to try to stop her or to refuse the fruit himself. And Eve blames the snake. She says he tricked her, which also isn't true. He tempted her, with the truth as it turns out, but he didn't trick her.

I don't know if you've spent much time in court, but I worked as a reporter in Shelburne and we covered court every week. I'll tell you something. Once someone was found guilty, the judge would ask them if they wanted to say anything. Any time any of them started blaming someone else, like, "I got in with the wrong crowd," the judge came down on them like a ton of bricks. They like it if people take responsibility for their behaviour, rather than trying to foist the blame on someone else. I wonder what would have happened if Adam and Eve had done that? Or even if they'd said they were sorry and asked forgiveness? Would it have been different?

Adam and Eve caved in to the temptation for power. They wanted to be like God. And they tried to do it by rebelling against the one commandment God had given them. But it didn't work. They became less, not greater. The only way we can become like God is by surrender to God and allowing God's Spirit free rein within us. All they got was kicked out of Eden, cut off from the tree of life, and made to work a lot harder for their living after that. And their relationship could never have been quite what it had been before. Especially if they kept blaming each other for everything.

Now, Jesus also was tempted. After his baptism, the Spirit led him (or drove him according to Mark) into the wilderness for what we would call a discernment retreat. He needed to figure out what it meant to be the Son of God, what exactly God was calling him to do. And to do that, he went into the wilderness where there would be no distractions and he spent his time praying and fasting. For 40 days. That's where the 40 days of Lent comes from, when we're supposed to pray and fast, too, like Jesus.

And in this time, Jesus was tempted. And don't think these were easy peasy temptations he could just flip off the Tempter with. I believe they were very real temptations. I believe God wanted to be good and sure that Jesus had settled these things in his mind and heart before he sent him out to do his ministry.

The first temptation was to use his power to gratify his own desires, and also to abandon God's plan, to give up the fast and just indulge himself. To do it his way instead of God's way. He could have turned the stones into bread. He was hungry. He could easily have justified it to himself. He could have given up and quit the retreat and figured he knew better than God what he needed to do, that God was asking too much of him. But when he'd wrestled with this, he decided that it was not bread alone that kept a person alive, but what he really needed was that connection with God, obedience to God. We need to trust God and follow him, even if it's hard and challenging. So he resists that temptation, and trusts God to know best. And he's going to need that later on, when he faces the crucifixion.

I have been having trouble with my feet lately and my doctor sent me to a physiotherapist. He has been giving me a variety of horrible exercises to do to recondition my feet and my core and various muscles and so on. He is essentially trying to reverse the damage done by 60 odd years of bad posture and bad habits. And he seems to know what he's doing and it seems to be helping. But every time one of the exercises starts to get easy, he makes it harder. And I don't like them at all. And the temptation to quit or just to skip them this morning is very high. And I'm not going to lie: some days I do exactly that. But on the whole, I trust the guy and it does seem to be working and it would be nice to be able to go back to walking without it hurting. So most of the time I trust him and do them.

Well, that's kind of like following Jesus. Some days it's really hard. Some days it doesn't feel worth it. Some days we want to quit. Some days we'd much rather gratify our selves and our own desires and needs than whatever else Jesus has set before us. Not that we shouldn't meet our legitimate needs. Fasting isn't something we do all the time and we do need to look after ourselves, and keep ourselves in good health and able to do what he

calls us to do. But not instead of doing what he calls us to do. Not as our first priority. Following God needs to be our first priority. Keeping at it even when it's hard.

The second temptation of Jesus was to use his power and his relationship with God to show off, to make it all about him. "Look at me! I can jump off the temple peak and not get hurt!" Well, most of us show off from time to time. Not quite that dramatically, of course. And of course, it's nice to get praise and acknowledgement from time to time. But when you go out looking for it, trying to get people's attention, then your attention and theirs shifts from God to you, and that's never good. Before you know it, we start thinking we can control God and we are better than the people around us, and neither of those things is true.

Jesus recognised this trap. He saw that the Tempter was asking him to test God. Basically, to put himself in a position where he forced God to act, to rescue him. "You want me to do your ministry, you'll have to rescue me from this stupid thing I'm going to do." And when we start thinking we can magically control God, we're in trouble. Because we can't. God doesn't show up for our tests. So Jesus says, "No, we're not supposed to test God."

That leads to the third temptation, the temptation to power. The Tempter offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. Just think of the good you could do if you ruled all the kingdoms of the world! Most of us set our sights a lot lower than this. We just want to rule our family or our church or club or some small part of the church or club. Be big fish in a small pond. It's the same temptation: power. The ability to call the shots, to do things our way, to get other people to do what we want them to do. To be the boss.

The problem is, that to do this, you have to bow down and worship someone other than God, often yourself. You cannot exercise power over people and follow God, because that is not God's way. God has power and Jesus certainly exercised leadership, but he never coerced anyone. He never put anyone down to bring himself up. He never oppressed people. His power was the power of love and of loving service and vulnerability. Jesus allowed himself to be vulnerable to human beings to show us how much God loves us and to what lengths God is willing to go to be in relationship with us. He even let us kill him. That's God's kind of power.

It's a constant temptation for anyone in any leadership role not to exercise power over people for our own gratification. Instead, we have to lead by loving service. And we can only do this by following Jesus and completely surrendering to God – worshipping the Lord our God and serving him only, as Jesus puts it. I find it helps to remind myself of that every day.

This Lent, it might be helpful for us to notice what things tempt us. To pay attention to the ways we want to serve ourselves instead of God. What tempts us not to love God and one another. And then see if we can find what helps us to resist these temptations and practice those things. For Jesus, it was knowing the Scriptures and really absorbing them. That way he knew what was the right way to go and could resist temptation. For me, it's thinking about Jesus' life, his Incarnation and his death and keeping in mind his amazing

love for us. Not that this works every time for me. But it helps me know what I should be doing. What helps you? Whatever it is, spend some time cultivating that this Lent, strengthening your defenses. And when you mess up, as you will, don't hide from God. Take it to God for forgiveness and ask for help resisting next time. God is merciful and full of compassion, always willing to forgive us. I wish you a holy Lent.