



First Sunday in Lent

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner, St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Coeur d'Alene, ID 2020

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

Matthew 4:1-11

Today's texts open for us sin, temptation, resistance, and grace. Sin spreads by infection – and so does grace.

We live in days of fear of infection – these days now, particularly, of the coronavirus that is gripping nations in fear. Some say it is an amplified political gimmick. Others say it is absolutely fearsome and threatening on a scale like the pandemic influenza that killed so many over a hundred years ago. Even both of these reactions are infectious, themselves.

Sin – but also grace and holiness – spread by infection, moving and digging in under the surface. Let's get to this through our texts from Genesis and the Gospel of Matthew today, as we consider temptation.

Temptation – we find it facing the earliest human couple in scripture, and we find it facing Jesus. How does temptation lure and lead us into sin?

Let's begin with Genesis. What do Adam and Eve face in this moment?

Before we begin, I need to offer an aside here – Let's clear the old, stereotypical gender bits out of our heads as we consider this story, they aren't helpful. Really, Adam and Eve could have played either role. As a matter of fact, let's reverse roles in the story. Listen again to the story, this time with man and woman roles reversed.

The Lord God took the woman and put her in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the woman, "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."

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the man, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The man said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but 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.'" But the serpent said to the man, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the man 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, he took of its fruit and ate; and he also gave some to his wife, who was with him, and she ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Not much changes, right? But we hear things a bit differently. And, truly, either could have been in either role, right?

So, then, what's going on here with each character, with Adam and with Eve? Here is some of what is going on in them:

- Silent acquiescence – caving, not even showing up, passive following – Adam, in the text as we originally read and received it, has nothing to say but just follows along, nodding with no more than a grunt – first to God's command, then to his spouse's invitation.
- Amplification – fear to even get close to the thing that God has set apart – Eve amplifies what God said, adding "nor shall you touch it," which God never said.
- Shifting and questioning – other possibilities getting entertained. Fantasy enters the picture, changing perceptions and thoughts with the lure of something grandiose ("You shall be like gods"). This gets linked to the lure of pleasure of here and now, what is enticing in this moment.
- Silent acquiescence – one partner ends up again caving, not even showing up in mind, heart, or will, and just passively following – nodding with no more than a grunt.

We know how the story continues, then. They go into hiding. And maybe, maybe the ultimate Fall into sin was not eating the forbidden fruit but was hiding, and lying, and deflecting. Sin really came into its own because of not owning responsibility and acknowledging honestly before God and each other what they had done. Imagine how different a story would have emerged, for them and possibly for the ongoing reality of human life, if they have come out of hiding (sure, they were initially embarrassed and felt that first guilt), stepped forward when God came calling, and said, "Umm, we have something to tell you. I ate the fruit you forbade us to eat. And, why was it such a big deal in the first place??" What if a different conversation had happened? Maybe sin at its core is the hiding, masking, lying, cover-up, deflecting.

But sin shows its way of creeping in – and the stage for cover-up is set by what happens before:

- Fantasies that spin an alternate reality for me to pursue
- An urge to suppress awareness of what I've done
- A fear of consequences opening a desire to hide and deny and deflect so that I look unscathed and untouched
- A blaming of others, so self-protection takes the place of care of those around us

So, sin creeps in, and spreads its tendrils along and beneath the surface, so that the world in which we are born and raised steeps us in all that became habits and patterns of those who went before us. Sin infects our human life.

So, let's turn now to the Gospel of Matthew's passage about Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. What does Jesus face?

- First, there is the obvious three types of temptations, as they are, right on the surface...
 - o Immediate satisfaction of need – justified response to desperate hunger
 - o Big show of self – opportunity for grandiosity
 - o Immediate power grab – shortcuts to control and influence
- But second, accompanying each surface temptation is the deeper set of messages that are infectious enticements – right below the surface, and spreading across the surface to all point it can reach.
 - o With the first temptation: “You have all you need in your power to never be hungry again. And, think of what you could do for others with that power. All you need to do is change reality a bit – and, really, make it better. Why did God make all these rocks that are inedible, anyway? Why not put them to good use by changing what they are in their nature? No harm done – right?”
 - *On Friday, there was a local NPR interview with a man who grew up in North Idaho, son of a father who was a horse-trainer. And his father trained horses through cruelty and fear. He also found it easy to be cruel and fearful with his family. The son saw there might be a different way of training horses, by partnering with their nature rather than fighting and breaking it, to help the horse learn to desire by working with what the horse wanted to do in the first place. This man and his wife, now in their 50s, have fostered over 40 children from homes where cruelty prevailed. He said he has noted a consistent pattern – that children who were bullies or who became cruel to other children or people had first learned to be cruel to animals and to beat animals. He said, “It’s an easy step to make, once you have without consequence been cruel to another being, to be cruel to a fellow human.”*
 - *It’s in the unmaking of something in order to turn it into something we desire that opens the gateway for us to treat other creatures, and eventually other people, as things with no intrinsic worth to be respected.*
 - o With the second temptation: “If you are what you say you are, show the world right now – and make it a big show. If you really let loose, then everyone would of course come to you, follow you, listen to you, and, well, worship and adore you because there’s nothing wrong with being worshipped by others a bit. Think what you could do with all those adoring people who would see you caught and brought to safety by angels.
“Oh, and by the way, those angels are supposed to respond to you and shield you from every harm and serve your every need. Put it to the test – force God’s

hand – force your father’s hand. And, for goodness sake, put those angels to work. That’s what they were made for, right?”

- With the third temptation: “You want to set the world right, and you see all the pain and sorrow, and all the potential.”

And here, the devil knows what Jesus cares most deeply about, and seems even to anticipate that moment when Jesus pauses overlooking Jerusalem and says, ‘Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I would have gathered you to me as a mother hen gathers her chicks, but you would not...’ and Jesus wept over the city.

“You want to set the world right, and you see all the pain and sorrow, and all the potential. Think what a little political alliance could do for you and your path. I can get you things, if you just follow me.”

- *My first and second major professors in my PhD program each offered me this kind of temptation. There was a third that didn’t, who would have been a far superior choice – and yet, I was disappointed because I wanted more accolades from him than he in his eastern European was going to give. So, instead, I gave myself to the professor who showed great enthusiasm for me and for my topic, and who painted pictures for me of all the publications I would do with her. Had I done my research, I would have found out that she had a reputation for eating up graduate students – only one in a ten-year span had ever finished a doctorate with her, and many more had been stalled because their work was never good enough and there was always one more thing to do for the “Lord Advisor.” I thought, in my own hubris, that I could handle it differently, because I was, after all, different. It took the chair of the department coming to my aid and extracting me to get me out of that situation. I went right to another professor, of milder but similar manner, who again enticed me with what I would be able to achieve in alliance with her and her many minions – and again, I should have known from the tension and anxiety among her many workers at the National Opinion Research Center that I was not in for a good ride. In both cases, I chose in part because of what was beguiling and what they promised. And I gave up something of myself.*

These are the enticing types of messages of temptation – not just from the devil, but also in our own heads, and in the voices and promises and suggestions of other individuals and of the societies and cultures in which we live and move.

Thanks be to God, the Gospel also shows to us Another Way. Jesus shows us another way, through a kind of resistance. But it’s not just about resistance of temptation. We often might think that the only remedy for giving in (acquiescence) is absolute resistance – kind of like that first amplification through fear in the Garden, where we add more intense prohibition to ourselves. Jesus doesn’t just respond with resistance – he responds with allegiance to Another Way, a Different Way of Being. He responds with allegiance to integrity, fidelity, trust, care for

more than himself. He responds with a rootedness in respect for who he is as God's beloved, who God is as the One who loves him, and who and what all people and creatures are as God's fellow beloved.

He is not seduced by his own wild and weakening hunger, not seduced by visions of grandiosity that were easy to come after 40 days alone, not seduced by shortcuts. Jesus claims another way and consistently points to a greater, higher good

- "Life is not just about bread, about this immediate need today – there is so much more we hunger for, that matters more deeply"
- "I am not more than other creatures, whether they are rocks or angels – only God is above it all – and God is with and in it all and cares for it all."
- "No shortcut is worth giving up who I am and whose I am – I belong to God and I belong with God."

Jesus clears the path, keeps the path clear, and refuses the shortcuts and their infectious tendrils.

And THEN – angels DID come. And THEN, bread WAS given to ALL who hunger. And THEN, Jesus gave his own nature to be food for his beloved. And THEN, Jesus saw Jerusalem and wept to gather the city, and the world, all of us, to himself.

Friends, just as sin spreads by infection, so grace, goodness, truth, integrity, love, care all spread by infection. A holy infection that spreads and takes its place across all surfaces and with tendrils rooting down into all the deep places in our lives.

Jesus brought righteous infection to us, and to this world that he loves and has come to save and embrace.

Come, friends, take in Jesus. Let this holy infection take us, each and all – and may we carry Christ from this place in our lives as an infectious presence of God's grace in this hungry world. Amen.