

1 Lent, Year A

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

Psalm 32

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

The holy season of Lent is here. This is a time of fasting and prayer, a time in which we throw sheets and veils over all the razzle-dazzle, over all our shiniest objects, over all our spiritual crutches and best liturgical gimmicks. Why? For the same reason you “give up” things during Lent. We do it in the hope of becoming undistracted. We do it so we can get down to brass tacks. We do it so we can focus on what matters most: namely, that the Lord our God is with us regardless of the trappings of worship; that his grace is sufficient for us; and that he cannot and will not be contained. This, my friends, is the season in which we seek to tell ourselves over and over, “God is enough. God is enough. God is enough.”

And yet, if you have ever tried to live that way for more than five minutes, you already know it's not as easy as it sounds. If you've ever said, “Lord, I'm putting nothing else in front of you; I will have no other gods before you; all I need is you, O Lord,” then you already know the myriad ways, great and small, by which you have failed in the past and are bound to fail again in the future. We try to tell ourselves that God is all we need, and still the razzle-dazzle of everything *but* God never stops calling to us.

There is a word for this. It is called “temptation.”

We often use the word “temptation” casually these days, usually as a joke with a wink and a smile. I was at a local clothing store yesterday purchasing some things I probably didn't actually need when the owner—who is a dear friend, knows my tastes, and always has me pegged—came over with something in his hands and said, “Now Lonnie, I cannot let you get away without showing you this! Doesn't that look nice? Can't you just see yourself in this on a warm spring day?” I chuckled and said, “Man, get away from me!” (even though I really *could* see myself in that item on a warm spring day). A big ol' grin spread across his face, and he said, “Well, you know I *had* to tempt you!” I *was* tempted, and I may even go back to get it!

But that? That was just fun and games. That's just one of our favorite local merchants cutting up with me and having a good time. That's using the word “tempt” as a joke. But *real* temptation—the kind that leads us to sin, that robs us of our souls, that steals us away from God—*real* temptation is much more subtle and slippery. It usually seems small and harmless, and it rarely reveals itself for what it truly is. Then, all of a sudden, after one tempting baby-step leads to another, we awake to find ourselves in a world of hurt, and sometimes even in a world of hell.

The theologians say temptation is anything that entices us to evil and sin.¹ In other words, it's *whatever* woos us to put anything else between us and God. If we look to today's story of Adam and Eve, we can learn two important things about how temptation usually unfolds.

¹ McKim, Donald K. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996. 276.

First, have you ever noticed that in the story of Adam and Eve, it never says *anything* about Satan or the devil? It does not say that Satan appeared in a puff of wicked smoke to ensnare poor Eve. It does not say that the devil came along and sneered at her face-to-face. What it does say is that the *serpent*—one of God’s own creatures—came over to her and started asking questions. And yes, those questions led to her and Adam’s temptation and, ultimately, to their downfall, but what we have to acknowledge from the very outset is that evil rarely shows up in all its nasty glory and says, “Ta-da! I’m here to tempt you!” Instead, almost all temptation comes to us in the form of the familiar. It comes in the guise of those we already know and trust, sometimes without them even knowing that their words are leading us to temptation. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, “The voice of the tempter does not come out of an abyss only recognized as ‘Hell.’ It completely conceals its origin. It is suddenly near me and speaks to me.”²

This is how evil works; we see it all the time. Evil takes a thing that is good and twists it in our heads just enough to put that thing between us and God. Like C.S. Lewis says, “Wickedness, when you examine it, turns out to be the pursuit of some good in the wrong way . . . Goodness is, so to speak, itself: badness is only spoiled goodness. . . . Evil is a parasite, not an original thing.”³ For example, OxyContin is a great thing for people who’ve had surgery. It is *not* a great thing for the thousands of people across America who have fallen into the opioid epidemic and are losing their homes, their families, their jobs, and their lives. Likewise, the Internet is a great thing for sharing information at lightning speed, but it is not a great thing for those who fall prey to easy access, lies, bullying, pornography, and all the things that make us less than who we are meant to be. Evil takes the good and tempts us with a twist, and we hardly ever see it coming.

The other thing we learn about temptation from Adam and Eve is that it’s always bound up in one question and one question only: “Has God *really* said?”⁴ This is the question the serpent asks Eve. “Did God *really* say you couldn’t eat of that fruit?” Almost all temptations we experience—including the small ones—are tied to a mistrust of what God has said. We put ourselves in God’s place over and over because we do not take him at his word. We do not believe him. Then we seek after other fruit, other freedoms, and other gods, and they let us down every time.

That’s Adam and Eve. What about Jesus?

Jesus comes along thousands of years later, and this time Satan does not leave it to some stupid snake. He himself shows up, for no substitutes or surrogates will do. Satan tempts Jesus in the flesh, in his faith, and in his very soul, and each time Jesus responds with the word of God. Unlike us, Jesus is actually able to remember and to believe what God has said . . . to take him at his word and let it be enough, even when Jesus is starving in the wilderness.

But here’s the thing. I think many people read the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness as though it’s merely an example to follow. They assume that life is all about choices, and unlike Adam and Eve, Jesus happens to have made all the right ones. They view this story as though Jesus is nothing more than a teacher—a guru who has simply given us a pattern to

² Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Creation and Fall / Temptation: Two Biblical Studies*. New York: Touchstone, 1997. 116.

³ Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*. New York: MacMillan, 1952. 35.

⁴ Bonhoeffer. 116.

follow—and all we have to do is to be sturdy enough, smart enough, strong enough, and good enough to follow in his footsteps and do what he did. (Good luck with that.)

That’s not what it’s about. As one of my favorite preachers and theologians Fleming Rutledge puts it, “[This] is not to be understood simply as Christ reliving the human story and making right decisions instead of wrong ones.”⁵ The fact is, the Gospel is not a self-help book, and the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness is not a go-and-do-likewise instruction book for you or me. Try as we might, even by following the example of Jesus, you and I cannot “better” our way out of our life of temptation and sin. We just can’t. The moral of the story today is *not* about will power. Temptation is all around us, and no matter how hard we try to con ourselves into letting go—no matter what we throw our sheets and veils over—our hearts are always prone to wander; our souls are always looking for the razzle-dazzle; and we are always going to fail at convincing ourselves that God is enough.

That’s the bad news.

But here’s the good news.

*Because we **can’t** get it right, Jesus has gotten it right **for us**.* The moral of the story was never about *our* willpower or *our* ability. It was always about Jesus.

The hard truth is that you will struggle for the rest of your days to do the things you ought to do and not to do the things you ought not to do. And you will fail. Miserably. But there is one whose potency outweighs your incapacity,⁶ whose righteousness outweighs your sinfulness, whose proximity to God outweighs your temptation from God. He is Jesus: friend of sinners and vanquisher of Sin. The fact that he has done it for us is the essence of grace, and there’s a reason why Paul in his letter to the Romans calls it over and over, “Free gift, free gift, free gift, free gift!”⁷

So, given that Jesus has done all the heavy lifting for us, does this mean we can just throw up our hands, cry out, “To heck with it all!” and as Martin Luther once said, “Love God and sin boldly?” Can we stop striving for goodness, leave here and do whatever we dadgum please? Well, kind of yes, but mostly no.

Yes, we should live in the joyful certainty that nothing can separate us from the love of God, especially our own inability to be perfect. We will get sin and temptation wrong all our lives long, and we might as well not hold that fact over our own heads since God himself seems to have gotten out of the business of holding it over our head first.

But still, we Christians should strive to be like Jesus, to follow his pattern, and to let him dwell in us richly. In other words, we should still try not to give into temptation, not to sin. Why? Not because it’s up to us to get it right in the way that Jesus did, but because it’s our joyful response to the fact that he’s already gotten it right *for us*. Our life lived in obedience along the

⁵ Rutledge, Fleming. *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015. 541.

⁶ Rutledge. 545.

⁷ Romans 5:15-17

narrow path is our “thanks be to God” for his “free gift, free gift, free gift, free gift.” In fact, it is the free gift working itself out within us.

As we close today, I’m reminded of the powerful words of “A mighty fortress is our God,” that great hymn by Martin Luther. Verses three and four sum it all up perfectly:

And though this world, with devils filled,
should threaten to undo us;
we will not fear, for God has willed
his truth to triumph through us;
the prince of Darkness grim,
we tremble not for him;
his rage we can endure,
for lo! his doom is sure,
one little word shall fell him.

That word above all earthly powers,
no thanks to them, abideth;
the Spirit and the gifts are ours
through him who with us sideth:
let goods and kindreds go,
this mortal life also;
the body they may kill:
God’s truth abideth still,
his kingdom is for ever.⁸

When it comes to sin and temptation—whether we’re in Eden, in the wilderness, or in any point in between—we who have been redeemed by the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ have Good News to tell. As it turns out, the thing we hoped to be true was right all along:

God is enough, God is enough, God is enough.

Amen.

⁸ Luther, Martin. *The Hymnal 1982*. New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1982. 688.