

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11
First Sunday in Lent A; 02.29.23; G. Miles Smith+

Here we are in the season of Lent. Maybe you started Lent with ashes on Wednesday and the invitation to consider your mortality and penitence before God. Now, this first Sunday in Lent takes things farther. The scripture invites us to reflect upon *temptation* in our life.

There are two big stories of temptation in the scripture lessons today: *the Garden of Eden*...and *Jesus' wilderness temptation at the beginning of his ministry*. In the first story you have a "crafty" *talking serpent* doing the tempting...and in the other you have *the devil* tempting Jesus. We could think that a *talking serpent* might have been a sure sign to Adam and Eve that something was up! :) And of course, when the *devil* showed up with Jesus then that would seem to be an obvious sign that some temptation was coming!

And so, perhaps we have become accustomed to thinking of temptation showing up with big red flags like this? And surrounded by a dramatic moment? And, in a way, we might wonder how could one actually be that seriously tempted *when it is so obvious*?

And so, surrounded with dramatic temptation stories in the Bible and other popular stories we tell ourselves, it is possible that temptation *can appear to be largely absent...from our lives*. And it can seem like, maybe, temptation is more in the province of *super religious people* or especially *hard-living folks* with a lot of chaos and drama in their lives already.

Because, after all, we mostly try to be *reasonable people*, right? Deliberate and careful. Reasonable people don't really have to deal with temptation? Just some mistakes here and there?

And so, it is interesting how *the language of temptation*, in our common talk, tends to get reduced to things like...*whether or not to eat a slice of cake...or buying something we really don't need...or saying something snippy to someone*. Things like that. Tricky and potentially troublesome things...but fairly mundane stuff...pretty low-level existential threats.

But what I want to suggest to you is that when we read these scripture lessons carefully, temptation really isn't about strange and exotic matters at all. And it definitely isn't so much about cake! :) It is about big, important, *reasonable things...that can actually escape our notice*.

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In Genesis, the temptation in the Garden of Eden, when you finally get through all the strangeness of this primal mythological story, is actually about "*the knowledge of good and evil*". Doesn't every person need to know about that so they can choose wisely?

In Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, his temptations were basically about *having food to eat...being safe from harm...and wanting to live in an orderly world of good kingdoms*. Who doesn't want such things?

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So I think it could truthfully be said that, ironically, it is *tempting to make temptation far weirder than it really is*. In fact, temptation is all about supremely *reasonable things—otherwise it wouldn't actually be tempting!*

For that reason, *temptation can more often be something that is almost unrecognizable in the moment*. There is often no drama present. No talking serpent and no devil in disguise. When we are most likely to be in a moment of temptation we will just think we are making the next *reasonable* decision of the day. We will think we are simply choosing what we most *need*. We will think we are choosing something *good*.

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When I look back over my life--which seems to be a continuing opportunity as one gets older—when I look back over my life, the choices I made which ended up hurting other people or myself...often seemed in the moment to be *a reasonable pursuit of something good*.

And, the moments which ended up being temptations, in my experience, were rarely recognized as temptation *in that moment*--but usually much later, in *retrospect*. And that--is so very humbling to realize.

What might you see if you look back?

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The problem with “the knowledge of good and evil” in the Garden temptation was *not* “the knowledge of good and evil” in itself. If the story had taken a different turn then we could imagine that God would have eventually given to Adam and Eve such knowledge as mature creatures. It is needed so that we might choose wisely. But, instead, the knowledge of good and evil was *taken* by Adam and Eve as their *own private project*, on the *sly* from God, *in the fear that God could not be trusted*. And the next reasonable step is that we too may easily imagine *our lives* as our own private project, somehow apart from God.

The problem with “having food to eat, being safe from harm, and wanting to live in an orderly and peaceful world” was *not* any of those things in themselves. Jesus could have pursued them...and maybe done some good...and then been embraced as the kind of Messiah that Israel desperately wanted...a kind of *Jesus Caesar*. But, Jesus had to ask himself--was that really *his* calling? *And, as important as all that is, is that all the world really needs?* Because somehow, when we focus on good things like...what we need, and being safe, and wanting to live in an orderly and peaceful world—somehow that just keeps going sideways. *Somehow, strangely, that is not enough*.

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Somehow, we seem to end up--very reasonably--turning our lives into our own private projects, apart from God, that become ultimates in themselves.

But, as Jesus put it finally: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”

Which we apparently don't quite do--even when we think we are. In retrospect. Which is profoundly humbling.

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But it is not hopeless.

Because God's endless desire for us is indeed “the knowledge of good and evil”. It is also “having what we need, being safe from harm, and living in an orderly and peaceful world”. *It just never was supposed to be something we did all by ourselves, apart from God*. It was just never supposed to be like this.

Maybe, we still have a lot more to learn from God?

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May we all have a holy and blessed Lent!