

Akron Christian Reformed Church

March 1, 2020

The First Sunday in Lent

Genesis 2.15-17, 3.1-7; Romans 5.12-19; Matthew 4.1-11

The Ambiguity of Temptation

Reference: *The Selfless Way of Christ: Downward Mobility and the Spiritual Life*, by Henri Nouwen

Prayer: Oh Lord help us now and during this week to keep our eyes upon your Son as he moves towards the cross. We tend to flinch. We tend to skip the gruesome pain and jump straight to the joy of the resurrection. Give us eyes to watch. Give us hearts that break. Give us the will to follow, even if at a distance. Amen.

In our Old Testament lesson this morning, the snake begins to speak. It begins kinda like Columbo, scratching its head and acting dumb, getting it wrong on purpose. “So, beautiful woman, God told you that you can’t eat from any of the trees out here in this luscious garden? That’s strange they all have such gorgeous, ripe fruit. Can you smell their sweetness? I don’t know why he’d tell you not to eat any of that fruit.”

“Oh, silly snake,” the first woman exclaims with laughter in her voice, “we may eat any of the beautiful, luscious fruit, just not the fruit from that tree over there. See it? If we eat its fruit, we’ll die.”

The snake, having lured her into its trap, responds with, “You will not certainly die, beautiful one.”¹

And then it continues with its deadly sales pitch, “God knows that when you eat its fruit your eyes will be opened and you’ll know good and evil, just like God does.” Which is partially true.

But notice, the snake doesn’t tell her that as soon as she tries to be just like God everything will change. The snake’s a good sales-snake – it leaves out the details that might lose the sale and it allows the customer to fill in the blanks with her own thoughts. (What’s really the world’s oldest profession? Sales.)

And so, the woman looks over at the tree and thinks, “Hey, Snakey is right, that fruit does look pretty good, and I do want to be just like God. And I’m sure that God wants me to be just like God too.” So, she picks some and eats it. Then she gives some to the man, *who’s right there, with her, the whole time*, and he eats it too, and their eyes are opened. Snakey was right – sorta. Truly, they suddenly see good and evil. They become us. But that’s because evil infiltrates every aspect of life.

And this account isn’t really a historically accurate narrative of someone named Adam, Eve and Snake. It’s a theological narrative that reveals the source of evil. Humanity was tempted to become like God and so we tried. Our desire to be God was stirred up since the beginning. Evil thrives because we chase a lie as truth.

Through the years, the one thing that we’ve learned about Evil Itself, is that Satan is a liar. John makes this point explicitly clear when he says, the devil’s “a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there’s no truth in it. When it lies, it speaks its native language, for it’s a liar and the father of lies.” (Jn 8.44)

We should read Genesis 3 and hear the lie that the Devil peddles to the first woman. And we should read Matthew 4 and hear the lie that the Devil peddles to Jesus in the wilderness. We should read those two stories and understand that this creature is evil and cannot speak without lying.

But make no mistake about it, such lying evil is always coated with ambiguity. Part of our mind can always make the lie sparkle a little more than it actually does. “Hey, you’ll know the difference between good and evil.” Such a positive thing! (Watch politicians strongly claim one thing, when it suits them. Then claim exactly the opposite thing, when it suits them. And they always seem so sincere. So honest. So certain. They’re convincing.)

Changing stone to bread and being able to feed the whole world with all of the bread Jesus could make out there among the stones of the wilderness, that doesn’t seem so bad. In fact it seems pretty good. Jumping from the top of the temple, in front of all of the Jews, just to prove to everyone, including himself, that he’s the Son of God, that doesn’t seem like that big of a deal. It makes sense. Bowing to the Evil One in order to escape all of the suffering and to free the world **right now** – hey that may be worth it.

However, all such the temptations are lies. Something bigger is at stake than what we see on the surface.

As I thought about it this week, it seems to me that Jesus’ third temptation is the most like the woman’s. In the third temptation of Jesus, Satan flat out lies, just as it did to the woman. “I will give you all of the nations of the earth.” That’s a flat out lie. It’s a political promise that he can’t deliver. Just as is, “you won’t certainly die, you’ll just become like God.” Both are temptations to replace God and God’s will with something else. But it can’t be done.

¹ Ah, you see, the snake was there that day. The snake did hear God speaking to the man. And the snake gets the quote right. The snake’s been planning and scheming and waiting. “You will not certainly die.”

I think that we too often think of temptation as being the battle between choosing right and wrong. We talk about being tempted to lie, to cheat, to steal, to commit adultery, etc. and quite honestly, there's not much ambiguity in such acts, and so the church simply says to us, "Stop it. "Don't do it. Quit it." And we all generally know whether or not something's right or wrong.

But it seems to me that calling such things "temptation" trivializes true temptation. Because, it seems to me, that true temptation always has an aspect of ambiguity. We hesitate because we know something isn't quite right, but then, our rational side kicks in, and we go for it because we convince ourselves that it's not all bad.

I think that the greatest temptation that we Christians are facing today has to do with the questions that we talk about around here quite a bit. "How much will we conform to our culture? What is proper and fitting for a Christian to participate in and what isn't? What's part of Christ's kingdom and what's part of the shadow kingdom, the pseudo kingdom, of the Evil One?"

And when we put it in those terms we recognize how difficult it is to figure out what part of our participation in the kingdoms of this world, which we can't avoid, is good and right and proper, and what part is evil and destructive. The answer isn't easy. And we've watched the church argue itself into acquiescence with evil over and over again.

Because the answers to all such questions are ambiguous. It seems that the answers may even change from person to person, and time to time. So, how do we respond? How do we know when something is a temptation and when something isn't?

Well, the only way we know the proper response is by knowing the heart of God -- which we learn to know through spiritual discipline. Nouwen says it's only through the disciplines of worship, meditation and prayer that we begin to know the heart of God, and then we can begin to conform to it.

The discipline of worship creates a rhythm or structure for our lives. So that after a while we begin to measure time by worship. "Oh yes, it's Lent, Jesus is suffering. Oh yes, it's Easter, Jesus is rising. Oh yes, it's Pentecost, the Spirit is let loose. Oh yes, it's Advent the Savior is coming. Oh yes, it's Epiphany, our Lord is at work." And that rhythm begins to resonate in our bones and gives us meaning at our deepest level.

The discipline of worship grounds our life in God's story of redemption. Sitting in worship, week after week, allows us to merge our story with God's story. In worship we discover that the random and mundane things of our own personal lives aren't the definition of who we are, but rather the events in the life of Christ define us, and that they infiltrate our mundane daily experiences.

The discipline of meditation is learning the word of God, so that it may guide us. And often, in meditation, we're looking for one word, one thought, one idea that has the power to turn us around, or to keep us turned towards God. One word that will strap itself to our day and give our normal, daily experiences meaning.

The discipline of prayer is probably the discipline that we give up on the most easily. Because it's difficult to be still before God, when our hearts and minds are racing with trivialities. But through prayer, by spending time in pure quiet, without reciting our lists, without multitasking, we begin to discern what's in the heart of God. The fog of ambiguity between good and evil begins to lift. It's only when we become intimately united with God's heart that we begin to discern the ambiguities of temptation, and we begin to know what God's will is in the middle of them.

It's Lent. It's a time where we experience with Jesus his great suffering, his great sacrifice. It's a time where we turn to Scripture for a word to give us succor. It's a time where we abandon some of the baubles of life so that we may experience a bit of the quiet in the presence of our God.

Come then this morning to this table, because here, in this sacrifice we discover the kind of God we follow and are called to model. A God of great love, and mercy, and grace, who calls us to be a people of great love, and mercy, and grace.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.