

St. Paul's Congregational Church, March 5, 2017  
Lent 1 – Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11  
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

In her book, Kneeling in Jerusalem, Ann Weems introduces us, welcomes us, on our Lenten journey through poetry:

Lent is a time to take the time  
    To let the power of our faith story take hold of us,  
A time to let the events  
    Get up and walk around in us,  
A time to intensify  
    our living unto Christ,  
a time to hover over  
    the thoughts of our hearts,  
a time to place our feet in the streets of Jerusalem  
    or to walk along the sea and listen to his word,  
a time to touch his robe  
    and feel the healing surge through us,  
a time to ponder and a time to wonder...  
Lent is a time to allow a fresh new taste of God.

We are observing the first Sunday of Lent – we have begun our 40 days of preparation, a time of reflection, of prayer. A time when we are especially called out of ourselves – a time when we are called into ourselves- in order to open ourselves to see that fresh new face of God. After the great celebrations of Christmas and Epiphany, here we are : suddenly thrust on the Way to the Cross.

I wonder, though, maybe that's what life is all about – we move from joy and celebration to depression, fear, mourning all too quickly – the highs and the lows are always with us. But the message of Lent is that through the sorrow, joy comes. And I think for us to truly feel the joy of Easter and our smaller, personal Easter moments – we can't skip over the darkness times; that those times truly do have the potential for transformation, for healing. Hard as those times are, as we open our hearts and face the discomfort, we will get through them and we come to realize that we are never alone – never. So, let's enter into this season of Lent, accepting the challenge of examining ourselves and our relationship with God. Our texts this morning give us plenty of challenge for sure: temptation, idolatry, sin, patience.

Where did this season of Lent come from – and why is it in place, anyway? It isn't mentioned anywhere in the Bible. The early Christians didn't need this season of self-denial: they were clearly set apart by their love for one another, their willingness to give up status, freedom, and even their very lives for the faith they owned. Their life was always in the balance – lived on the edge those days.

But once the rush of persecution ended and Christianity became the state religion, life became “normal” again. Jesus hadn't returned as quickly as people expected and they settled in for the long wait. Eventually as we'd expect, the difference between Christians and non-

Christians became less obvious. The Christians no longer stood out expressing such bold love for each other, fewer and fewer were being arrested for siding with the poor, sick, handicapped – Christians became comfortable.

Doesn't that sound familiar? Then and now?

So the season of Lent evolved as a six week period of spiritual discipline before Easter. Frederick Buechner writes this definition of Lent (*Whistling in the Dark*, p. 82): “ In many cultures there is an ancient custom of giving a tenth of one's income to some holy use. For Christians, to observe the forty days of Lent is to do the same thing with roughly a tenth of each year's days. After being baptized by John in the river Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness where he spent forty days asking himself the question of what it meant to be Jesus. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask one way or another, what it means to be themselves.”

We begin this journey into the wilderness together in the midst of our “comfortableness.” At the start of Lent our scriptures lead us directly to the question of temptation – certainly something we don't like much to face, let alone even acknowledge sometimes – in our comfortable lives - but listen for the word of God in these texts and risk moving outside of our comfort zones. And see temptation for what it is.

Again, I can't help but reflect on the monthly group sessions with the women from Integrity House at Bread for the Journey. They never fail to pull me out of my “comfortableness” as they share their stories, their work in recovery programs. This month there were several who were back to program – they'd been clean, one for 17 years, but they'd relapsed and either through self-referral or via the court system, are back in the midst of a fight for their very lives. They all talk about process – recovery is a life long process – not a quick fix. They've learned the hard way that quick fixes don't work – and they've learned that they can't do it alone. Their willingness to face the devil, the evil, of addiction and talk back to it is deeply moving and an inspiration for each one of us as we face our own demons and enter into the healing process. They talk about temptation – they face themselves squarely and ask the questions we're called to ask too: when you look at your face in a mirror, what do you see in it that you most like and what do you see in it that you most deplore? Of all the things you have done in your life, which is the one you'd most like to undo? Which is the one that makes you happiest to remember? Is there any person in the world, or any cause, that if circumstances called for it, you would be willing to die for? If this were the last day of your life, what would you do with it? Hard questions, indeed.

Buechner says, “To hear yourself try to answer questions like these is to begin to hear something not only of who you are, but of both what you are becoming and what you are failing to become. It can be a pretty depressing business all in all, but if sackcloth and ashes are at the start of it, something like Easter may be at the end.”

Do we ask ourselves these questions? Do we go deep with them? As individuals? As church as we look ahead to our annual meeting later this morning? The women of Bread for the Journey will tell you that the reward is greater than we can imagine. What will it take for us to break out of our comfort zone? How do we face our own temptations? Our own idols? Do we?

There are parallels between the story of Adam and Eve and the story of Jesus – and parallels to our own stories too.

God had a purpose for the first human beings: to keep the garden of Eden, to name and have dominion over all the rest of God's creatures. And God gave them what they needed, gifts,

for that vocation – food for strength and pleasure in their work. God empowered them for the task, with the freedom to carry it out – with authority over the rest of creation.

God had a purpose for Jesus too – to save people from their sins – to be Emmanuel – God with us. God empowered Jesus for this vocation. “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Adam and Eve and Jesus were set aside by God for a purpose. And they were all empowered for their tasks. And so are we. We too have been set aside to do God’s work as individuals and as church – we have been empowered for our ministry!

But like Adam and Eve, and like Jesus, we too are all subject to temptation.

For Adam and Eve the temptation was a simple act – eating the forbidden fruit.

Jesus’ temptation was both more subtle and more complex – but it was no less a temptation to be like God. “If you are the Son of God,” said the devil, “then act on it. Use your power. Be like God creating bread out of stone. Be like God, orchestrating a miracle by a death-defying jump. Be like God, ruling over the kingdoms of the world.”

To be like God – isn’t that at the heart of all our temptations as well? To exercise God’s authority by making our own rules or passing our own judgments? To claim God’s wisdom about how our lives, our church, our world ought to be? This story is ours too.

And where there is temptation, there is always a tempter. For Adam and Eve it was the snake – a creature of God. Our tempter often takes the form of a creature of God too – perhaps a voice within ourselves, maybe another person, pressuring us to give in, luring us with dreams and promises we find hard to resist. And sometimes the tempter is the way of the culture – I’ve worked hard for everything I have – why can’t other people do the same? Or, all churches are declining, we’re no different – it’s the way things are. We’re all too familiar with the ways of the world and the temptations they bring, aren’t we. And we’re also all too familiar with the way we are likely to respond. However we experience temptation, whatever name we give to it, the power of evil, the power of sin and death – it is real. Terribly real.

How do we face it? Like the women of Integrity House: head on? Like Jesus did, face on? Do we talk back?

Two temptations in our passages. Two tempters. But the outcome of each was drastically different, wasn’t it.

Adam and Eve gave in. They ate the forbidden fruit – trusted the tempters word, rejected God’s word.

Jesus resisted the temptation – he countered face to face every word of the tempter with the word of God. He accepted the limitations of power and authority imposed on him – to be God with *us* Jesus had to be human before God.

Jesus’ victory over temptation gives us hope that we too can resist. Because even though he was Son of God, he was no different in this respect than we are. Temptation was as strong, as real for him, as for any human being. And his power to resist was no greater than ours. But Jesus’ example shows us the power of God’s word. Jesus’ example shows us that we too have that power at our disposal. Adam and Eve had it too – but their downfall was trusting the tempter more than God’s word.

But we must rely – and really only can rely – on the truth, the grace, the faithfulness of the word of God – no matter what in our experience causes us to doubt it. Our task for Lent is to concentrate on recognizing our need to rely solely on God. We like Jesus have a God-given purpose for our lives. St. Paul’s church, like Jesus, has a God given purpose. We, like Jesus, are

to place our wholehearted trust in God's word. We, like Jesus are to worship and serve God alone.

One of the most insidious characteristics of temptation is that it's often difficult to recognize it for what it is. All of the devil's temptations to Jesus seem helpful, reasonable: eat because you're hungry. Maybe real temptation happens when we get tired, discouraged, overwhelmed - when the loud voice of the world drowns out the still, small voice within each of us - when we choose, and we do choose, to get caught up in the prevailing winds of the day. Or we just plain forget, ignore, compartmentalize those teachings that most of us know so well from our Sunday School days. Or we live through events that test our faith and lure us away from God and have us serve evil instead - often when we are not even aware of it!

Lent says to us, pay attention to your life. Don't get carried away by the evil, by the distractions that exist in our daily lives. Get back to the basics. Like the women of Integrity who have recognized the fight of their lives, who have given themselves over to a higher power - we call that God as do most of them. Pay attention to your life. What distractions of the world have taken us over?

There is hope in all of this though: no, we can't undo the past or go back to the past, no matter how much we want to, no matter how hard we try. Lent is the time to touch Jesus' robe - to feel the healing surge through us. Lent is a time to ponder, a time to wonder. Lent is the time to open ourselves to a fresh new sense of our purpose, to be so very grateful for the gifts we've been given.

May we find that new understanding and strength as we travel through Lent and into the future lying ahead, beginning today at our Annual Meeting! Let's open ourselves to that fresh new taste of God. Amen