

A Sermon for Lent 1, Year A
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 & Matthew 4:1-11
February 10, 2008
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Gifts and Temptations

Count yourselves lucky that you're in church today, because we've just heard two of the most evocative stories in the Bible on the same day! And if you're ever looking for stories about temptation, and good and bad ways to deal with them, you can't get much better than our readings from Genesis and Matthew.

Right before our reading from Genesis, the author describes in great detail than how God created the first human body with his own hands, and how God gave it life by blowing his own breath into its nostrils. It's a story that gives us a deeper understanding of what it means to be human. Anyway, by the time we get to today's reading, a paradise has been created – the garden of Eden, as the story describes it – and is given as a gift to the man. But it doesn't take very long before temptation triumphs, all is lost forever, and the man and woman are left with nothing more than fig leaves and regrets. The second story describes how, after his baptism, Jesus is driven into a wilderness that is just about as far from paradise or Eden as one can get. And there, unlike Adam and Eve who were surrounded by ease and plenty, Jesus is exhausted, starving, and alone as he struggles with his time of temptation and challenge.

These two stories stand in such obvious contrast, and it's impossible not to want to compare them, and see what comes to the surface from that comparison. On one level, it looks simple enough – Jesus is the winner, and Adam and Eve are the losers. They are as weak as he is strong. So, maybe the moral of these stories is that it's better to be like Jesus, than like Adam and Eve. And the cherry on top of this sundae is that fact that we're hearing these stories on the first Sunday in Lent, and the season of Lent is supposed to help us become more like Jesus, at least as far as things like temptations are concerned. And if we stopped there, we'd be mostly right because there really is such a thing as being more or less “in shape” spiritually. After all, the Christian life places demands upon us for which we must be ready to respond appropriately. And part of being ready has to do with the character that is being formed within us by God's Spirit, and part has to do with the personal habits we adopt. And getting our spiritual lives “in shape” can require the same sort of effort and discipline that we use to get our physical bodies into shape.

But there's more to these stories than simply this. We need to remember that what makes the story of Adam and Eve a true story is *not* that it accurately describes something that happened a long time ago. That's almost beside the point. What makes the story of Adam and Eve a true story is the fact that it describes exactly what life is like here and now. It's a story that tells the truth about us. Because, just like Adam and Eve, we are frequently confronted with things which, on the one hand, look really attractive, but which, on the other hand, we suspect is not what God has in mind for us. And in those moments when we have to make a choice, it's better that we are stronger and more developed spiritually.

So there really is some truth to the notion that it's a good thing for us to take the time, and put forth the effort, to pump up our spiritual muscles. And it seems to me that Lent is as good a time as any to begin doing that.

However, as valuable as it is to approach these two stories in this way, there are some risks to this approach. For one thing, all this talk about "getting into shape" could lead into a sort of macho spirituality; sort of like the young monk who bragged that he could fast any other monk in the monastery right under the table. And that misses the point of spiritual growth. Another risk from this approach is that we might come away from them with a mistaken idea of what victory is really all about.

Look again at what's going on in the story of Jesus' temptation. He has fasted and prayed for a long time, and he's famished and exhausted from the effort it takes to sustain something like that. In other words, he's not at his best. He's not bursting with any sort of vim or vigor, physically or spiritually. He's used up all of his resources in just making it to that point; in just being faithful to the fast. And this is when the temptations hit him.

Now, I suspect that if the temptations had come upon Jesus on a good day, he would have done things differently. He probably would have come up with all sorts of clever responses, and told a few insightful parables, and generally put the devil in his place. But he doesn't have the sort of strength or energy to do something like that.

Now, I think that most of us can relate to his situation. Because we've all been faced with temptations that came to us when we were out of resources. And even though, at that moment, we can look back to a time when all of those resources were in place, right at that moment, however, we are having a hard time resisting being pulled, against our will, by the forces of our appetites or our ego. And in many of those times, it's wasn't simply a matter that we weren't strong enough; it's just that we allowed our spiritual tanks to get empty. And that, for me, is one of the best arguments for attending church, and praying, regularly.

But, back to Jesus. There he is in the wilderness, completely out of gas, and being tempted, really tempted. But look at what happens. Jesus does not say one word of his own in response to any of the temptations. He simply quotes scripture. He has no resources of his own, so he simply holds on to God, and lets God's words work through him. (And that happens to be for me, as good an argument as any for reading the Bible regularly.) And the outcome of this encounter, although it is a victory, is *not* a victory that comes from a personal, spiritual strength. Rather, it's a victory that comes as a gift from God. It's a victory that comes about because Jesus is willing to surrender to God, and rely upon God's strength and God's resources. Even though I'm certain that the time Jesus spent in the wilderness gave him a better relationship with God, I'm equally certain that it gave him something more: it gave him the insight and the courage to surrender, and therefore to depend, not on his own best efforts, but on an emptiness that can only be filled by God, and that can only be received as a gift of grace. And that's a hard lesson to learn, but so important; Jesus learned it in forty days; however, it may take us a lifetime.

Several months after this all happened, Jesus said to his disciples, “When you are handed over to your enemies, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time.” I would be willing to be that, when he said those words, Jesus was thinking about his experience in the wilderness. And it was advice he could give to others, because it was a lesson he learned personally.

In the end, becoming strong spiritually, and developing a deep and rich spiritual life, is never about us. It’s never about what we can accomplish or achieve. Rather, it’s always about God, and about what God can do for us. And it’s about surrendering ourselves, and emptying ourselves, so that we can receive God’s gifts. And if we can do that, we’ll learn that these are gifts which will never fail.