

False Goodness

Gen 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7, Matt 4: 1-11

Lent 1A

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Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

Gen 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Matt 4: 1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

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A few years ago while vacationing in FL, we had the chance to take an airboat ride through the marshlands of Alligator Cove. The airboats look like an enormous fan with a few seats for the tourists to see alligators up close and personal in their natural habitat. For our safety, we had headphones on to hear the tour guide while also blocking most of the sound of the high-speed fan moving us along, and safety vests in case something happened to the boat and we

ended up in the water. Although the possibility of ending up in alligator infested waters was a mere remote possibility, it was a brief yet scary acknowledgment of just where we were. Our guide reviewed some pretty obvious safety rules, including not to reach out to tease or touch an alligator. Trust me, not one of us on the airboat was the least bit tempted to do that. Not a chance!

As we sped across the grassy water of the marsh we saw several alligators popping their eyes and snouts up out of the water, others fully sunning themselves on logs or rocks, and others swimming by with just a glimpse of their tails.

While we were safely on the boat enjoying the tour and without the slightest bit of temptation to move our hands off of our laps, way beneath us there was another kind of temptation going on, the alligator snapping turtle.

The alligator snapping turtle is massive and can weigh up to almost 250 pounds. They are carnivorous, and while their diet is primarily fish, they have been known to eat almost anything else they can find in the water—even in a few cases small alligators! This predator relies on a uniquely deceitful method of foraging for fish, they rely on ‘temptation.’

The turtle will lie completely still on the floor of a lake or river with its mouth wide open. At the end of the turtle’s tongue is a small, pink, worm-shaped appendage. The turtle wiggles the end of its tongue so that it looks like a worm moving through the water. When a fish comes to eat the worm, the turtle’s jaws rapidly close, trapping the fish so that it cannot escape. What appeared to be a sweet treat for the fish is merely a trap. The death of the fish was cleverly disguised as desire. What was tempting was in reality terrible. The alligator snapping turtle really is a crafty little serpent.

That is the power, the lure, of temptation. The appearance, the potential, of a pleasure, a treat, a delight, can be deceptive and so inviting. Destruction can be disguised as desire. The lure of temptation is, “I will be happier.” That is why it was so easy for all of us on the airboat to not reach our hands into the water. There was no thought at all that we would be happier by doing that.

And while the alligator snapping turtle would not lure any of us by his temptation trap, there are endless real and clever temptation traps for all of us on dry land; so many ways we are offered something that appears to be something that will make us happy, keep us happy, yet will instead close us in, hold us in, and escape is hard, if not impossible at times.

Perhaps it is food, alcohol, gossiping, animosity, a grudge, or a material possession, perhaps it is an iron-fisted ambition, a not so carefully hidden prejudice or a lifestyle choice that is increasingly reckless, that lures us in in such growing, deceptive ways, so that once what brought us happiness, now owns us, holds us, controls us, and it does not even make us happy any more. One becomes two, becomes, three, becomes more and more. Caught in the persistent trap of what makes us happy—yet doesn’t keep us happy so we need to go for more and more and more---holds us in the jaws of our own alligator snapping turtle. The goodness we keep on reaching for is false.

Adam and Eve encountered their own such turtle in the Garden of Eden. Lured in by some careful wording implying that God was hiding the truth from them, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil,” they ate the forbidden fruit. Lured and caught, they had their eyes opened, and did not like what they saw. What was done could not be undone.

The temptation of Adam and Eve is a metaphor for the sins we all commit, as each is a temptation to turn from God in some way, to rebel and find ways that are self-reliant rather than

acknowledging our need for a relationship with God. Like Adam and Eve whose guilt dressed them in fig leaves, we eventually know our regret.

As we begin our Lenten journey, we must take a close, honest look at temptation, as that is the very root of why we need to go on this trip in the first place. The temptations for false goodness cause us to rebel against God and to follow our own ways. Yet we are left burdened rather than fulfilled. The burdens of the temptations that hold us in, that close in on us, are burdens that are physical, emotional and spiritual. For all of the effort and sacrifice to feed the temptation, the emptiness remains. Blaise Pascal once described this essential condition of humanity as having a "God-shaped hole," and this is what Jesus demonstrates. There is no satisfying of that emptiness other than in and through our relationship with God. Or, as Augustine wisely said of our relationship with God, "our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee."

To be human then is to accept that we are ultimately created for relationship with God and with each other. Recognizing this will not do away with the temptations that are part of this life, but rather it will give us the courage to stand in the midst of them, to bear us up, not simply surviving but actually flourishing in and through Jesus, the one who was tempted as we are in the wildernesses of our lives, and thereby knows our struggles first hand. This same Jesus now invites us to find both hope and courage in the God who named not only him, but all of us, beloved children so that we, also, might discover *who* we are and *whose* we are. For that is how we are freed from the jaws of false goodness. Amen.