

Temptation Shows Us Who We Are

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

Matthew 4: 1-11

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Genesis 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; but 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.”

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner.

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken.” Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

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.

Matthew 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 plate of green olives, a chance to claim credit for work that I did not do, or the opportunity to watch a blood and guts horror movie are offers I can very, very easily pass up without any sense of being tempted. However, a plate of chocolate chip cookies, or to not return the grocery cart to the stall when the weather is really nasty, or to grab my phone while driving for a quick text or make a note for myself are temptations that I really do have to work against, fight against, over and over.

Temptations are a double sided challenge for us as their short-term good and ease undermines our long term goals and identity. The negative consequences are lost in the moment.

We can be tempted through our weaknesses, as what is alluring could help hide or heal our vulnerability or helplessness. If I’m worried I’ll forget to return a phone call or not include a particular piece of information on a report, or in a sermon, isn’t better to take the chance of a few seconds while I’m on the road? We can also be tempted by our strengths, to not allow our image or abilities to slip, preferring to pat our own back, even if it not a safe or wise decision. I want to hear, “Oh great, you remembered,” not “How could you have forgotten?”

Yet being tempted is a natural part of the human condition. Adam and Eve had the perfection of paradise and yet strove for even more. Jesus had been baptized in the waters of the Jordan and anointed by the words of God, “This is my Son, the Beloved with whom I am well pleased.” Immediately that divine revelation is put to the test. Our scriptures are rich with the temptations of our faith ancestors, leading Paul to have written in his first letter to the Corinthiansⁱ, “No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.” Is it any wonder that when Jesus taught us to pray, he attacked temptation head on, “Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.”

In Christian theology, temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil have been singled out as ‘enemies of the soul.’ The world tempts us by apathy or rebellion to God’s design, flesh tempts us corrupt passions, and the devil tempts us away from God and faith. In a UCC Daily Devotional Matt Laneyⁱⁱ described temptation as, “We tend to think of temptation as the sort of things that happen in Vegas and we’d rather have stay in Vegas. Yet temptation is mostly a habit of turning good things (such as food, credentials, influence) into ultimate things, giving them far greater worth and allegiance than they deserve.” It’s not that we are necessarily craving and courting a bad thing, as much as is the worth and allegiance we place on it. Our temptations can truly show us just who we are.

Adam and Eve were tempted to rebel against God’s plan for them in the Garden of Eden, to gain knowledge that was not supposed to be theirs. Lulling Eve into a conversation that would chip away at God’s words to eat not of the tree of knowledge or they would die, luring her into seeing that they would not die but rather would be like God, she ate, and Adam ate. After all,

what could be wrong about having more knowledge? The crafty 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.”

When they gave into temptation, Adam and Eve not only rebelled against God’s plan, their eyes were opened to shame, embarrassment and failure at truly judging good and evil. They did not die in the literal sense, but their innocence and their gentle life in the garden was dead. They gained knowledge that they did not know how to use anymore than even today we know how to use.

In ‘Reaching for the Forbidden Fruit,’ Jill Kirchner-Roseⁱⁱⁱ asks, “If we humans start playing God and judging good and evil, how long will it take before we say this person or tribe is good and deserves to live, but that person or tribe is evil and deserves to die, or become our slaves? How long will it take before we judge this species of animal is good and deserves to survive, but that one is worthless and can be driven to extinction? How long until we judge this land is good and deserves to be preserved, but that river is without value and can be plundered, polluted or poisoned?” We see this misjudgment played out in the very next story of the Bible – with Cain who judges his brother, Abel, as “not good” and decides to kill him. No wonder God says do not eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. No wonder Jesus says, “Do not judge.” Why? Because we don’t know how. When we start to judge, we will inevitably misjudge.

In our lectionary we focus on Jesus’ Transfiguration—his revelation as divinity—just before we move into Lent. An event that happened just weeks before Holy Week, yet hearing it just last week is what leads us from the light of Epiphany season into the penitence of Lent. Just before we begin these 40 days we are newly reminded that Jesus is equally both human and divine. This includes his human ability to be tempted, to turn stones to bread, to test God’s commitment to the Son of God, and to have power and wealth beyond measure.

Jesus refused temptation in favor of faithfulness. And blessedly, what happened in the wilderness did not stay in the wilderness:

Jesus refused to satisfy his own hunger, but later he fed thousands in the wilderness with just a few loaves of bread.

He refused to showboat his divinity from the heights of the Temple, but later he was lifted up on a Roman cross for all to see.

He refused earthly dominion but offered the kingdom of heaven to those who take up their cross and follow him.^{iv}

Our temptations can truly show us just who we are, and when we have the faith and grace to resist them, our temptations can truly show us just Whose we are. Amen.

ⁱ 1 Cor 10:13

ⁱⁱ https://www.ucc.org/daily-devotional/daily_devotional_tempted_to_greatness/

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://uccredlands.org/sermons/reaching-for-the-forbidden-fruit/>

^{iv} https://www.ucc.org/daily-devotional/daily_devotional_tempted_to_greatness/