

"It All Started, In The Beginning"

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

A member of Weight Watchers was determined to make it through a full week without cheating. He dropped into a cafeteria one day for a cup of coffee. A woman with two doughnuts and a cup of coffee sat down on the other side of the table. The pastries smelled truly delicious, but the man remained firm in his decision not to indulge.

Lo and behold after a while the woman got up, leaving behind one whole doughnut. An internal struggle ensued, and, as he told himself, not wanting a perfectly good donut to go the waste, temptation triumphed. The man reached across the table, picked up the doughnut and started to eat it. Just then the woman came back with a second cup of coffee.

Aah, temptation! That is at the heart of our Old Testament lesson from Genesis this morning. We all know the story; Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The Tempter, in the form of a snake, invades paradise and seduces Eve and Adam into doing the one thing they have been expressly told not to do; to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. What do they hope to gain by this act of disobedience? It's right there..., "...for God knows that when you eat it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God."

This particular desire, to be like God, has always been at the root of all temptation and sin in the human race. Consider its manifestations: to have our own way in everything; to have complete control of our lives; to be the captains of our own ships, and designers of our own destinies; to be free to determine for ourselves what is good and evil without fear of correction or reproof; to do what is right in our own eyes without having to answer to anyone else; especially any superior being, such as God.

Instead, in that moment of surrender to temptation, we read, "Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked..." Naked, here, is not literal in meaning, it is figurative: it means their consciences were exposed and their frail creaturely nature was revealed in their sudden awareness that they were not and could not be God. From that first moment of trying to be God, all manner of evil has ensued ever since. Yet the human race has still not given up the idea of trying to be Gods in our own right. We still try to live life by what is right in our own eyes.

That brings us to the first thing to consider about temptation this morning: Temptation is a reality in all our lives. Consider our Gospel lesson this morning. Jesus is in the wilderness being tempted. Temptation was a reality in Jesus' life, especially at his weakest moments. Like him, temptation comes to us in our weakest moments too; when it is especially hard to resist. Temptation is a reality in all our lives.

That leads us to the second thing to consider about temptation this morning: Temptation is for many the ruin of their lives. It has been noted that the first temptation in the history of the human race took place in a lush garden, with humanity at peace with the whole animal creation. The temptation of Jesus, the second Adam, took place in a barren wilderness, with what were now the wild beasts. That contrast between the first temptation and the temptation of Jesus, one in a garden, the other in a desert, is a picture of the ruin which has been wrought by humanity's desire to control its own destiny apart from God.

We know better. But, as we all come to realize, knowing better is not enough. Consider when we are really tempted to do what is right in our own eyes, but we suspect is not alright in God's. We know better, but

the lure is almost irresistible. Spouses KNOW that cheating can end their marriages and lead them to disgrace. Substance abusers KNOW that it will impair their health, and it may prematurely end their lives in a horrible way. Businesspeople KNOW that sooner or later shoddy practices will be exposed. But, knowing is not enough. Temptation is a reality and a potential ruin, but it still wins. Something more is needed. We need help.

And that leads us to the third thing to consider this morning: Temptation has a remedy. The remedy to temptation is not will power. It would be so easy if will power were the remedy. Just say no. Right? But reality is that the things that truly tempt us, are the very things over which we have the least self-control. We are like Mark Twain who said, "I can resist everything except temptation." No amount of moralizing seems to be helpful. We wish it were, but it's not. We are vulnerable. We need a remedy to help us deal with the temptation. There is one.

Our Gospel lesson shows us Jesus' way. Here, three different temptations are laid before Jesus. All of them have the same end result in mind; to get Jesus to break himself free from his Father's will and plan. Now someone could observe here that Jesus was also God, and he couldn't really be free to break off from himself. Without getting into the intricacies of the divine relationship, let me ask you a question. Haven't you found it to be the case that temptation has often broken you into two minds, into nearly two competing persons within your own body? The reason the Scripture calls this the temptation of Christ, is because it was possible for him to be truly tempted. Jesus really could have said yes to evil at this point. That is why Jesus' sinlessness is so significant for us. Here's a Bible verse that tells us why that's so important to our relationship with God. It's Hebrew's 4:14-16. Look it up and memorize it. It is among the most profound statements on God's grace. It will embolden your relationship with God.

Now, since Jesus was able to resist, let's look at his method. In each case the tempter offers Jesus some great thing. Then Jesus gives his answer. Note what the answer always is; it is always from the words of God. "It is written...Again, it is written...for it is written..." His final answer, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." Jesus' heart's desire, his joy, was the will of God and the service of God. So much did he fill his mind with the things of God, and the words of God, that when the great moment of testing came, he was able to respond not just with a clever retort, but with a commanding rebuke to temptation.

The contrast with how we usually face temptation is like this. Remember Homer's epic poem THE ODYSSEY, where Odysseus' ship approached the island of the sirens who sang songs that lured sailors to their death of the jagged rocks? He ordered his crew to fill their ears with wax after binding him to the mast so that he could hear their temptation without fear of surrendering to it. He literally white-knuckled his way through the temptation. That's such a metaphor for how we face Temptation, relying on our own will power.

But there's another Greek story that helps us see how Jesus dealt with Temptation. When the ship of Orpheus sailed by that same island, Orpheus sang a song that was so beautiful and so divine that his sailors did not even listen to the sirens' music!

That is what Jesus did. He responded to temptation's limited vision with the unsurpassable vision of God. That is what we are to do if we are to pass the tests of temptation in life. We are to fill our lives with the song so beautiful that we cannot even hear the song of the Tempter. We are to so feed ourselves upon the words of God, and fill our minds and hearts with the thoughts of God, that nothing less than God's vision will be able to fit in them. It is to make such a positive commitment of our

lives to God's purposes that we do not have time nor place for the negative, the destructive, the sinful.

This is the remedy to the reality and the ruin of Temptation. Self-will power is a delusion. It is part and parcel of the same temptation to be our own Gods and control our own destinies by ourselves. Only God's redeemer, Jesus Christ, at work within us can unleash the power of God's remedy for temptation and sin.

Someone has caught this truth in a prose entitled, "The Pit." It goes, in part, like this:

A MAN fell into a pit and he couldn't get out. Many observers commented as they passed him by.

ONE said: "You have the pit you deserve."

ANOTHER said: "If you would have listened to me, you would never have fallen into that pit."

A SELF-PITYING PERSON said: "You haven't seen anything until you've seen my pit."

A NEWS REPORTER said: "Could I have the exclusive story on your pit?"

AN I.R.S. AGENT said: "Have you paid your taxes on that pit?"

A REALIST said: "That's a pit."

An IDEALIST said: "The world shouldn't have pits."

An OPTIMIST said: "Cheer up! Things could be worse."

A PESSIMIST said: "Things will be worse."

JESUS, SEEING THE MAN, TOOK HIM BY THE HAND AND LIFTED HIM OUT OF THE PIT, and said, "Come, follow me".

The pit of temptation and sin is an awful place to be. But there is One who releases us. There is no other lasting remedy to the reality and ruin of temptation. Fill your life so full of Jesus, his thoughts and his will, and he will set you free.