

“Knowing Our Limits”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
February 10, 2008
First Sunday in Lent
Scripture: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11

The curiosity to try a taste of what we know is wrong. Addictions - our inability to stop ourselves. Temptation. Our Bible's stories on this first Sunday in Lent describe two different accounts of temptation. The first, set in the mythical Garden of Eden, describes our human prototypes Adam (his name means simply human being) and Eve, (who is just called “woman” in this story) succumbing to temptation and getting kicked out of paradise. The second, Jesus being tempted, has familiar temptations: food, safety, power, but an uncommon, heroic, almost inhuman response.

It is a wonderful story from Genesis, from the beginning. Rudyard Kipling, a long time ago, wrote a collection of stories he called Just So Stories. His Just So Stories explained why things are the way they are and included tales like “How Fear Came” and “How the Tiger Got Its Stripes.” A former colleague of mine like to teach children that some of the stories in the Bible are “just so,” kinds of stories. And I believe that this story from Genesis today is a “just so” type of story. Because, it seems, the story is designed to answer basic kids questions like, “how come we wear clothes?” and “why do we not like snakes? And “how come people die?” And so we should really imagine ourselves around a campfire, seated next to a master storyteller. Our imaginations are needed, for we must be able to hear the snake talking.

The Garden of Eden is described as creation's original paradise with a river flowing through it. And because there was no one to till the garden, God created, out of the dust of the ground (in Hebrew, Adamah), a human (in Hebrew, Adam). And God took this human and put him in the garden and commanded him to eat freely of every tree in the garden, “but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2:17).

You know what happens next. The crafty snake appears to the woman. And the snake asks her if God said they could eat from any tree in the garden. The woman says yes, with the caveat about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The snake tells her they won't die, but instead will become like God. And so, seeing how beautiful the tree was and that it was good for food, she took its fruit and ate, and she gave it to her husband, and he ate.

Other than hearing the distinct voice of first God, and then a snake, this is a story many of us have experienced. How many of us have done something we knew was wrong, and had to face disastrous consequences. Like sneaking out after curfew, hoping we wouldn't get caught. Like driving home from the bar after a friend asked if we were okay to drive. Like cheating on a test and getting caught.

The limits were set, and the consequences were clear. But with the encouragement of a sneaky snake, Adam and Eve took the fruit and ate it. And we humans have been succumbing to our temptations ever since. We didn't read the rest of the story, but you can imagine what happens next. After eating the fruit of the tree, the man and woman hid from God. God, not yet knowing apparently what they had done, figures it out. Like a parent who senses the shame on their faces, God asks, "Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" And what happens next? The man blames the woman, the woman blames the snake, and with that, we first learn that life has limits.

The storyteller winks and says see, that is why things are just so. The story concludes with God doling out punishments that end like this, "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19).

And so it is, ever since those first humans walked in the garden and gave in to the temptation, we know that life has limits. And the primary limit is that with birth comes the promise of death. "You are dust," God said, "and to dust you shall return."

The Gospel reading is placed in a corresponding position. Right after Jesus was baptized, Matthew tells us, "the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:16-17). Right after hearing God's voice, and receiving a name from on high, the scene shifts. That same Spirit who had descended upon him like a dove then led him up into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

The desert winds howled and Jesus fasted for forty days and nights, and was famished. And then tired, alone, starving "the tempter" came to Jesus. The first words out of the devil's mouth are "If you are the son of God . . ." And the devil's opening recalls what we all have heard, "if you are a good student," "if you really loved me," "if you want to make partner in this firm," "if you really cared," "if you are Bill's daughter," or "if you are really Mary's son" -- the devil knows how to set his hooks. Temptation comes at our quest for understanding who we are and what we are supposed to do as a result. It must have seemed so long ago that Jesus heard those enigmatic and troublesome and wonderful words that Jesus had heard forty days earlier at his baptism "this is my son, the beloved." "If you are the Son of God," well - should he or should he not turn stones into bread?

His stomach said yes, but Jesus answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then Satan whisks him from the desert to the capital city and took him up to the very pinnacle of the temple, the highest place, the place thought to be the naval, the connection between the heavens and the earth. As if Satan had heard the words spoken at his baptism, he said to Jesus "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; [and note that even the devil can quote from the Bible] 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.'"

And all those of us humans who have ever prayed for our own safety and protection, or for lesser things, like asking God to provide a parking space at the mall at Christmas time, or to deliver us to a victory in the football game. All of us can recognize this temptation. The devil says, “If you are the Son of God,” well, don’t you trust God to protect you? If you are loved by God, and if you have been good, well, shouldn’t you get some special treatment? It is a temptation, a trap that seems to especially hit religious people. But Jesus stands firm and seeks no special treatment. Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test”” (Matt 4:7).

And a third and final temptation, power. From the pinnacle of the temple, the sphere of influence expands. The devil takes Jesus to the top of a very high mountain and they look out over all the kingdoms of the world. All these are yours if only you worship me. And Jesus, who will preach and teach about a kingdom of God unlike the kingdoms of the world, is strong enough to say, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him”” (Matt 4:10-11).

Food, security, power. All these temptations so common to us, Jesus refuses. As the letter to the Hebrews puts it, “we have one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). And yet, like Jesus, it is in facing up to our temptations that we discover our identity. And our battle with temptations may be lifelong, like the alcoholic who has been sober for more than twenty years but who still attends weekly AA meetings. It may be that we fight a life-long temptation to seek the approval of someone who will never accept us for who we are.

A few days ago, on Ash Wednesday, Bill Englund said in his sermon that many people give up chocolate, but what the Bible story for that night urged was to give up our carefully constructed images of ourselves that we present to others. Chocolate may be easier to for us to give up than our more pressing temptations or addictions to work, drugs, success, or security. Lent is a season in which we strip away our pretensions and our crutches. It is a time to examine our lives, our loves, our passions are ideals, but also to confess and change the ways in which our lives fail to match up to our loves and ideals.

Lent begins with ashes – and the message first heard by Adam and Eve in the garden, “remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Lent is a time to know our limits. Remembering his own time with the tempter in the wilderness, Jesus taught his followers to pray, saying, “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Jesus, tempted with power, and food, and security, did not give in, but was steadfast until the end. His life was and is a constant invitation - an invitation to live life abundantly instead of fearing scarcity. An invitation to live for others. An invitation to give up power and seek out the lost and lonely. This Lenten season, may we resist temptations, strip away our pretenses and follow in the ways of Jesus. Today, all the way to the cross, and on to Easter. May it be so. Amen.