

As we begin Lent, we hear a famous set of stories: the Fall and the Temptation of Jesus. They deal with our frailty, strength, and responsibility. There is an unfolding temptation, a tempter, and the tempt-ed. Those are the similarities. There is, of course, a basic difference: the outcome! Jesus of Nazareth handled his temptations very differently from Adam and Eve.

All temptations have a way of grabbing our attention and placing us squarely in the present moment. And *tempus*, TIME, is indeed the root of the word temptation. When we are tempted, we become fully present, here and now, and other things recede away. Temptation brings a sort of exhilarating and tyrannical FOCUS to our minds. And of course, the best way to be tempted is to be told what you CAN'T do. I mean, we can be surrounded by all the wonders of the cosmos, every GOOD thing – ALL for the taking. But just tell me what I CANNOT have, and I will become obsessed with it. And then, here some joker comes along who makes it even more irresistible. I mean, if I stood here and said look around at the beautiful windows, or the altar, or the baptismal font, but **WHATEVER YOU DO: DO NOT LOOK AT THE CEILING!** And then some wise guy comes along and whispers, 'you know, the ceiling is pretty too. Nothing bad will happen if you look at it. You'll just be able to see what THEY don't want YOU to see.' **HOW DO YOU THINK THAT WILL WORK OUT?**

The story of the Fall is a tale about responsibility and what makes for poor choices. Some view this as a tale about disobedience; and on the surface that's true. God says 'don't do THIS' and Adam and Eve try it out anyway. But even if this is a tale about disobedience as the root of all suffering, it is a LONG JUMP from THAT to the idea that human beings are inherently wicked. Nothing fundamental changed about Adam and Eve – but fundamental changes took place about them and around them, when they made their poor choice. The story is about how we *respond* to the life we live, not about the life that is in our bodies.

Why do I say this? Well, in the chapter just before this one, God creates the cosmos and all the creature in it, and after each stage, God declares that “it is good!” And then on the sixth day, after God creates humanity, God says “it is VERY good.” And it is STILL **VERY GOOD**. That was never revoked! But THAT is what we forget every time we choose poorly. There is an *Original Blessing* we possess that is greater than any original sin we might perpetuate. Think about it: nobody sins because they WANT to be bad or to cause suffering. They sin because they want to be, or have, or do something that they THINK they NEED. The story of the Fall teaches us that we were created with a Garden that had everything in it, and we choose the ONE THING we thought we LACKED. It is from THIS perspective of lacking, this idea that we NEED to be stronger, smarter, richer, or more beautiful, that we respond to the world in ways that are unhealthy. God has created, and still looks at us, with eyes full of love, and STILL says: you are VERY GOOD. Yet so many times we just don’t believe this. We mistakenly think we need things or people, not because they are very good, but because they will somehow complete us. We have not trusted God’s original blessing: *Behold, you are very good*. How could we abuse each other, ourselves, or creation if we really believed in their inherent goodness? If we looked upon ourselves, the people, or the world around us and saw God’s blessing – how could we be tempted at all?! THIS perspective is what Adam and Eve lost. They thought they needed something to complete themselves in some way that they were lacking. They ignored the goodness, the wholeness they already possessed, and then they decided to look outside themselves for it.

But the story of Jesus’ temptation has another outcome. “Turn these stones into bread,” says the tempter. Not such a bad idea. Jesus WAS hungry. There is nothing wrong with taking care of your body. But Jesus knew he was more than just the sum of his body’s needs. He did not deny his hunger; he did not reject his body. But he remembered that his life was more than his body.

“Throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the Temple,” says the tempter. NOW this is getting interesting! “Stretch your muscles Jesus. You’re a man of such great faith: EXERCISE IT! Show the world just how great you are...” Now WE know from other episodes in Jesus’ life that he did not shrink from helping people publicly, even at his own expense. He was NOT shy about his gifts. No false humility there. But he also knew that his gifts were a blessing to be shared, NOT an ego boost for

his own satisfaction. Jesus was NOT trying to prove anything, and he had enough self-awareness to know he didn't need to prove anything.

“I will give you all the power in the world if you fall down and worship me,” says the tempter. Well, NOW we have the real deal! THIS is where the temptations were going after all. “Admit it, Jesus, you NEED me. Admit it, and I will give you all the safety and security you could ever want.” Jesus DOES NOT argue with the devil. He does not deny that we need safety and security. But he refuses to forget that peace of mind only come from GOD, who is already with us, with every breath we take!

Just as in Genesis – where a previous chapter establishes the original goodness of humanity before the temptation of Adam and Eve – here in Matthew the previous chapter establishes the blessedness of Jesus before his temptation. It is the story of Jesus' baptism. He goes straight from his baptism into the desert, where he is tempted. If you recall, during Jesus' baptism, he comes up out of the water and receives a vision of the Spirit of God descending upon him and saying, “This is my Son, the BELOVED, with whom I am well pleased.” It is from this experience, this knowledge that God completely loves him, that Jesus of Nazareth is equipped to face his temptations. It is the unshakeable knowledge that he is a beloved child of God that becomes the bedrock of his decision-making, the touchstone of his conscience. Yes, Jesus of Nazareth had needs. Yes, he had an ego, and yes, he had desires for safety and security. But the basis from which Jesus made his decisions is the certainty of his own basic goodness. His decisions were not based upon what he lacked. He knew, fundamentally, that he lacked nothing. THIS is what Adam and Eve got wrong.

And so, the next time you feel FOCUSED by temptation, the next time you feel you NEED something outside of yourself to be whole, or to be better: LISTEN again to God's words:

YOU ARE MY CHILD, MY BELOVED, AND YOU ARE VERY GOOD !