

First Sunday in Lent  
Year A - 5/3/2017

Genesis 2:15-17;3:1-7  
Psalm 32  
Romans 5:12-21  
Matthew 4:1-11

**In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...**

Today, as we do each and every year on this the first Sunday of Lent, we go to the desert. We are reminded of the trial of Jesus Christ as he is tempted by Satan - tempted three times. However, what I want to argue this morning is that although there are three separate temptations, we might better understand the message of the Gospel if we consider that in fact there was only one temptation offered to Christ out there in the wilderness.

This was the temptation - listen to how the Gospel writer introduces each of the offers made to Christ... "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread". "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down", and again, " If you will fall down and worship me, all this could be yours".

Jesus is being tempted to forget one important thing - his identity. "If you are the Son of God..." This is the point on which the whole passage hinges. The devil is trying to tempt Jesus into denying that he is the Son of God...

All of the Gospel writers link this story to the baptism, some more explicitly than others. Matthew says Jesus was led by the Spirit, that same Spirit which had alighted upon him in the river Jordan. There, in the swirling waters of the Jordan, the identity of Jesus was ultimately confirmed. There, the thin veil between heaven and earth was pulled back, so that those who were there might witness the truth of who this person was.

And now, in the heat and harsh surrounds of the desert, the devil is trying, in a way, to close that thin veil back up - to close the curtain.

What would be a greater fear for the prince of darkness than for people to know the Son of God; to be exposed to his light? Be sure, people - the devil is trying to tempt Jesus into denying his identity.

And this is where the link to that story from the book of Creation comes in. One of the reasons that the story of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden is such a powerful and enduring story is because it holds up a mirror and enables us to recognise ourselves and know ourselves. In a sense, it tries to show us our identity. It reminds us of our identity, and perhaps shows us the other side of the coin - the danger of forgetting that identity.

It has been said, quite rightly, I think, that about the most useless thing you can do with the Adam and Eve story, is to spend your time wondering what life would have been like if they hadn't eaten the fruit. This profoundly true story is not trying to reconstruct a historical incident, but to describe why it is that we humans are so well acquainted with both good and evil.

Why is it that creatures who have been made in the image of God have such a fatal fascination with those things that are, for very good reasons, off-limits? In grappling with this question the story-teller suggests that perhaps there might have been a time when humans had no concept of evil; when evil was something we had never encountered and couldn't have begun to imagine.

But it is one of the points of the story that you could no more imagine what that would feel like, than get a good feel for what it would be like not to know who you were because you had never met another human being.

Simply put, our awareness of evil, in its whole spectrum from the subtle and almost harmless deceit to the calculated genocide, is as much a part of us, as our awareness of our own selves. And whilst that might sound like the most depressing thing you can countenance, it is actually the first step in the process towards wholeness. That might seem like an outrageous claim, but I think it is true.

Can you fix something that you don't know is broken? Of course not. Can you heal a relationship that you can't even see is flawed and damaging? No. Surely the first step in a process of healing is the admission that something is broken, and needs that healing. So, if we become a people so deluded that we cannot even begin to see our own flaws and brokenness and humanity, then we have no hope of healing. So, yes, for me, the revelation that evil is a part of us is a liberating notion, because then I can begin to acknowledge it and, God willing, overcome it.

So, back to Jesus - and the insight we gain when we realize that the only way he is able to withstand the tempter is to not deny his identity. But you might say, "we can't use this story as an example, because we can't relate to the sort of temptations he faces". Well, fair enough - I expect that none of you has ever been offered the world and all its riches if you will worship the Devil.

But it is not just the devil that seeks to steal our identity. Each day we are besieged by countless advertisements that seek to create in us a sense of lack, insecurity, and inadequacy, undermining our God-given gift of identity with the promise that if we buy this car or use that deodorant or make our teeth brighter we will be acceptable.

The message of the consumer-consumption culture is simple: you are not enough. Not skinny enough, smart enough, pretty enough, strong enough, rich enough to deserve respect, love, and acceptance. And here's the thing: it's a lie, a demonic attempt at a kind of identity theft far worse than the one we've been trained to fear. And Jesus offers us a way out, a way to safeguard our identity by lodging it in God's good gift and promise.

It's said that when Martin Luther felt oppressed by his conscience or plagued by doubt, fear, or insecurity, he would sometimes shout out in defiance, echoing Jesus' words today, "Away with you Satan! I am baptized!"

And while I am not suggesting that you particularly follow his example in the exact same way (lest you end up incarcerated in the small padded room somewhere!), perhaps that is our Lenten focus, to remind ourselves of the promise inscribed on our foreheads at Holy Baptism: that God has declared us worthy of love, dignity, and respect and has pledged to be both with us and for us throughout all of our lives.

To be Christian is not to have that hole, that need, that awareness of mortality erased once and for all. Rather, to be human is to accept that we are, finally, created for relationship with God and with each other. Perhaps the goal of the life of faith isn't to escape limitation but to discover God within our needs and learn, with Paul, that God's grace is sufficient for us.

An understanding of that leads us to realize that faith doesn't do away with the hardships that are part and parcel of this life, but rather gives us the courage to stand amid them, not simply surviving but actually flourishing in and through Jesus, the one who was tempted as we are 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 by recalling whose we are.

In the name of God. Amen.