

## *The God Temptation*

Genesis 2: 15-17; 3: 1-7     Matthew 4: 1-11

Temptation is where the lectionary has us starting our Lenten season. Temptation can refer to an awful lot of things. Not all temptations carry the same weight. There is a really good reason that the lectionary starts us out in this domain of temptation.

We might trivialize the biblical notion that even gets repeated in the Lord's Prayer – *Lead us not into temptation* which then adds next *but deliver us from evil*. That sounds pretty weighty, doesn't it?

It sounds a lot weightier than 'deliver me from eating another chocolate chip cookie,' or 'deliver me from looking lustfully at that amazing body,' or 'deliver me from driving over the speed limit.' Those are more like matters of personal discipline and aren't exactly life-changing issues.

When we turn to our familiar scriptures, we need to recognize what's at stake in these issues of temptation.

The second Creation story in Genesis with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden can lead us to trivial conclusions. The story would not have nearly the hold on our imaginations if it was a simple matter of Eve and Adam eating fruit of the tree from which they were told not to eat. That simplicity would put it at the level of the three year old told not to eat the cookies in the cookie jar, but who disobediently dies so anyway. In the Garden of Eden, much more is at stake.

In God's instruction to the first couple, God says: *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*. Eating the fruit is like a death sentence. That should be pretty compelling logic, assuming that these two understand what "death" is all about. Let's not plague our understanding with exacting details with which the storyteller did not concern himself. That's a great way to smother a perfectly good story with inane questions. They knew what death was all about; it was the end of their existence as they knew it. Enough said.

We skip ahead to the sly serpent who engages Eve in conversation about the fruit of this tree. When questioned by snake face, Eve dutifully repeats what God had told her about the death sentence. Lizard lips proceeds to poo-poo what God said: *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*.

We hear that description of the effects of eating the fruit, and even we think, 'Hey, if my eyes will be opened, and I'll know good and evil, and be like God, how awesome is that?' The slithering slimeball has served up an enormous temptation, and not surprisingly left out the negative side of what the action entailed. It's like a politician

who is going to do the best-est of best things, but who leaves out the part about how you, or people an awful lot like you, are going to get jammed badly. It's a bi-partisan shoe that fits remarkably well. Tell the sucker what they want to hear, and be sure to glide over or sugar-coat the part that they *should* know about, but you don't *want* them to know about.

The rascally reptile has sold the little lady a bill of goods, and she buys the pitch hook, line, and sinker. The storyteller peers into her thoughts and comes up with this: *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.* While forked-tongue, fang face should have presented her with full disclosure, sweetie pie Eve hasn't used a critical cell in her brain to actually think through the implications of what she's doing. She doesn't give God's instruction to her a second thought. She also conveniently doesn't seem to have registered that *be like God* part of what the hissing huckster disclosed.

And as far as the Neanderthal she's partnered with, he hasn't even tried thinking yet. He simply sees food and eats it. He isn't going to start thinking until God points an accusatory divine digit at him. Then he plays stupid, which – let's be honest – may not be an act really; he's a block head.

Eve may not have mentioned the motivation to *be like God* in that editorial thought bubble we got in the text, and we don't know if that's deliberate. But let's face it: she quoted God's prohibitive words about the fruit from that tree pretty accurately. She heard **that** well enough, but she missed a big piece from limbless Louie's lines. I think that *be like God* consideration was an inconvenient fact that she decided to omit from her cute little thought process.

Yet that's the key point, the key to whole story, and the temptation to which we should always be paying attention. The temptation to be God or play God is what should be our primary concern. It just happened to be the one thing that Eve avoided thinking about when she decided to go for the fruit.

In order to seek such divine power, we must deny the existence of God at least in the moment, and therefore make it fitting that you should occupy that place yourself. From this denial of God or God's presence, we can then come up with our justifications for whatever we're doing. In our self-justification, we not only make our sinful over-reach seem natural and just, but we can also fill the void left by a God who is conveniently no longer present. As long as we deny God's existence and presence, we can justify almost anything as we take God's place.

In the season of Lent, we are not only coming before God in humility, confessing our sinfulness and seeking set ourselves aright, we are also situating God in the center of our lives where God belongs. When God is centered where God should be in our lives, we are less prone to presuming God acts on our behalf, or that God doesn't mind when we re-write the rules in our favor, or that God doesn't exist at all. Lent is the period when we assess ourselves and the settings on our compass with God, ensuring that we

are in a right relationship and aware of our dependence on God rather than trying to be independent of God and God's way to life. It is certainly a challenge in our spiritual discipline.

As we turn to the tantalizing temptations of the devil in the wilderness after Jesus has spent forty days and nights fasting, the first temptation is to turn stones into bread. Jesus can show off his self-sufficiency, that he has no need of God or spirituality or faithfulness. He can act as if God doesn't exist to act providentially on his behalf, providing what he truly needs. Jesus turns back the offer: *One does not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God*, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3.

The second temptation, like the first, begins *If you are the Son of God*, then prove yourself. Now atop the highest point of the great temple, the devil picks up on Jesus' expression *every word that comes from the mouth of God*. The devil quotes him those very words, a passage from Psalm 91, while asking for the proof of both his sonship and the providence of God and the value of *every word that comes from the mouth of God*. By throwing himself down from the high point of great temple, Jesus would show that indeed he is the Son of God, that God does provide exactly what is needed, and that *every word that comes from the mouth of God* is right and true and to be cherished.

Jesus responds by quoting another scripture back to the devil: *It is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."* It's a warning to those who couch their decisions with a veil of biblical authority as if that was all-sufficient in determining the mind of God. Rather it's a corruption of biblical understanding. Scripture is meant to guide, challenge and offer counsel, but hardly comprehends the whole mind of God.

This temptation speaks to us who might seek to test God and God's faithfulness to us, rather than admitting *we're* the ones whose faithfulness deserves to be tested by God. Jesus denies the validity of this proof of faith, offering instead a true witness of faith in God by remaining steadfast.

The third temptation would give Jesus all of the wealth, power and authority in the world in exchange for loyalty to the tempter. Even the most righteous may be tempted to take it all. With righteous intent, we may believe that we could gloriously achieve God's justice and peace, fulfilling the promise of God and his kingdom through *our* faithful exercise of authority over the wealth and power of the world, as if God somehow needed *our* help with accomplishing *God's* purpose.

But the temptation to trust in oneself and empower oneself always comes at the expense of God and faithfulness to God. The temptation is great to replace God and God's will with our own will. For the faithful, God must be professed as Sovereign Lord of all creation and its destiny. So, Jesus will not take this offer either. Jesus neither imagines himself on a par with or greater than God, nor is he willing to sell out his spiritual commitment to the tempter, regardless of the prize.

The God temptation is one that will always haunt, taunt, and tempt the human creature, luring and lulling us into the delightful belief that we are more than a

reflection of the image of God, but with our fine-tuned spirituality come to believe that we are capable of knowing exactly who God is, what God wants, and then surprise ourselves into how much we indeed have the mind of God. *Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*