

Lent 1, Year A
Genesis and Matthew
February 10, 2008
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We have before us today twin temptations narratives. In one of them, the story in Genesis, two people succumb to temptation. In the other, the one from Matthew, Jesus refuses the temptation. In my view these stories are very closely linked, and that linkage is deliberate, since Matthew obviously knew the Genesis story as he wrote his own. Though the specifics of the temptations are different in each, the deeper truth is that both stories present the same basic temptation, what is in fact the real temptation behind all others. Because of that together these stories show us the power of that primal temptation, why it is that we often succumb to it, and how it is that with Jesus we can begin to resist it.

In the Genesis story God instructs both Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for if they do, "in that day you will die." The serpent, who by the way does not become identified with Satan until centuries later, and then only in the Christian imagination, tells Eve that she will not die if she eats the fruit, but instead, "will become like God, knowing good and evil." Listen to that, it is very important. The serpent is telling her that not only can she be more than what she is, she should be more than what she is, she deserves to be more than what she is. Her basic humanity is not quite enough, for she can be like God.

This, folks, is the primal temptation we all constantly face. It is the temptation not just to want to do more than we have done, for that desire often leads people to great heights and the fulfillment of their human potential, but rather, it is the temptation to be more than we are, to be something other than what we truly are. The primal temptation is the temptation to see what you are in your fundamental humanity as somehow not quite enough. That is a temptation that in one way or another, at one time or another, gets to us all.

Think about most of modern advertising, for there you will see this temptation in its most obvious form. “Imagine, no limits” went one highly successful campaign a few years ago. It’s an awful thought, by the way, but the idea of having no limitations appeals to people. Think about how cars, hand cream, insurance, houses, breakfast cereal, computers are sold. The basic premise is that what you have right now is not enough, what you are as a result of what you have is not enough. If you buy this car you will be a smarter and more attractive person, especially if you are a male. If you are a woman and buy this lotion, or a man and buy this hair dye you won’t even age. That is wonderful, I won’t even age if I buy the right products. We are constantly bombarded with a single message in this world, and that message at its subliminal level is the message the serpent gave to Eve: be dissatisfied with what you have and what you are. Look for more, look at what I can give you that will make you more than what you are right now. In the modern world we are even

more subtle than the serpent, so we no longer say “you will be like God.” But that is the essential meaning of the message.

It is therefore no wonder that so many of us succumb to this temptation so much of the time. We are finite, we are limited, we do age, we do get frustrated and worried and resentful, we often believe we don't have quite enough to do what needs to be done, and so we do at times find that what we are just doesn't feel like its enough. Raising children, and I had two very good kids, drove me crazy at times, and Beth as well, because we just didn't know what to do, didn't know how to act with these people, couldn't figure out how to steer them in the right direction, and so spent long periods of time feeling completely inadequate, and wishing we were more, different, other than what we were. At other times we are all offered the “opportunity” for something grand, something greater than what we are and have right now, if only we will take advantage of this unique opportunity. At these moments, and there are many of them in life, there you are in the garden, faced with the temptation to reject your basic humanity in favor of something bigger, something better.

How unsurprising, but how disappointing, when it doesn't work. Succumbing to the temptation to be more than we are doesn't actually make us more than we are, but rather in the end brings home ever more fully our limitations, and simply points out to us the reality of our dissatisfaction. This is the genius of the Genesis story. Eve isn't God, and neither is Adam, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil doesn't make them into God, but rather only

makes them aware of the limitations they had previously experienced but not been bothered by. They had always been naked, for example, but now nakedness, rather than being a simple fact of life, was a source of shame, for it reminded them of their own finiteness, and so they covered themselves up. What God did in response was not so much punish them, as to declare that now, as a result of what they had done they would have to live forever with the results of their own newly discovered dissatisfaction with what they were. So of course they had to leave the garden, for the garden is the place for people who know who they are and who accept freely and fully what it means to be human. Adam and Eve had rejected their own humanity, and now had to live with the results of that. Indeed, in the story God is quite merciful, for God gives them clothes to wear as they move into the life of being burdened by limitations and finitude that previously were not experienced as any burden at all.

That is the fall, and that is our legacy. This story is not history, there is no history in it at all, but it is true, for it describes us to ourselves, and points out the inevitable result of deciding, of believing, that what we are in our own basic humanity is not quite good enough. For the effort to be more than we are has only two results, dissatisfaction with what we are, and shame as we discover that no matter what we do we can't be more. In our culture we are pretty good at hiding that sense of shame from ourselves, and terrible at disguising our dissatisfaction, but both are there when we succumb to the temptation to reject who we are and desire something more than what we are.

This insight can help us, or maybe I should be honest and say it helps me, understand what is going on in the temptation story of Jesus, and how he provides us with an answer to this. Jesus faces three temptations, but they are the same as Eve and Adam faced in the Garden. Whether it be turning stones to bread, or gaining temporal power, or forcing the hand of God, all these temptations were ways of inviting Jesus to reject who he was. They were ways of tempting Jesus to abandon his fidelity to God for the sake of something that was presented as more, as greater, as better. The temptation Jesus faced was precisely the temptation – couched in three different ways – to be dissatisfied, dissatisfied with what he could do, with who he could control, with his relationship to God. Unlike all the rest of us Jesus said “No” to that one primal temptation in the three forms it came to him.

He could reject this temptation because Jesus, as presented in this wonderful story, was so centered in the life of God that he was able to embrace without resentment, without dissatisfaction, without shame the fullness of his own humanity and all the limitations that implied. He could say “No” to that temptation because he had already said “Yes” to his own humanity, and that “Yes” was of course the expression of the deepest kind of faith and trust in God. For that “Yes” to limitation, “Yes” to finitude, “Yes” to mortality is in the end the profound “Yes” to God. For it is the really the truest way of saying that he trusted God so completely that he would enter into this life.

What I hope we can see this morning is that the same is true for us. Our “Yes” to the temptation to be dissatisfied with or ashamed of what we are is a “No” to God. Our rejection of our finitude and limitation and mortality is a rejection of what God has made, and what God loves. Our “Yes” to the very fullness of our humanity, with all the pain and heartache it can bring is a rejection of that primal temptation and a “Yes” to God, the best and highest way we can demonstrate our trust and faith. The evidence is anecdotal, but three and half million years of humanoid activity suggests very strongly that none of us are capable of going completely into that “Yes” we saw from Jesus apart from the transforming grace of God. But as we are more and more captured by Christ in this world, more and more transformed by his fidelity to God, we will become ourselves more and more able to embrace our full humanity, as he did, and so say “No” to the temptation to want something more than what we are. And in that “No” is our own best self, for in that “No” to dissatisfaction with what we are is our “Yes” to God what God is, and what God has made us.

