

First Sunday in Lent 2011 - *"Temptation"*

March 14, 2011

"The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones . . . If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; . . .'" (Matthew 4)

Temptation – Sin: These are the grist of the mill for the season of Lent. Most of the time we don't think of ourselves as sinners, though most of us would admit that we are far from perfect. And the meaning of Jesus has been and continues to be most often talked about in terms of saving us from our sin. A good part of that reference is from the Ancient Hebrew practice of sacrifice and atonement which the followers of Jesus knew and made immediate connections with after his death and resurrection. Now, centuries later, with a more global and indeed, much broader, perspective, we are re-framing our understanding of Jesus' purpose in his mission here among us. This does not require doing away with the ancient scriptures at all. In fact, it involves a deeper mining of the wisdom and ongoing teaching of God's Spirit that lies within them.

So, with that in mind, let's look at temptation – something that leads us to sin – to turn away from the purposes and identity that God intends for us to do and be.

What is tempting to you? Well most of us might think right off the bat of something relating to our physical appetites, for that is where we are initially the most vulnerable: chocolate, rich desserts, alcohol, ice cream, more food that we really need to eat. Some people give up such things for Lent and I'll talk about that in a moment. Perhaps moving on we might get to sex and other bodily indulgences in excess.

Suppose we move deeper: what about wanting what others have – coveting/envy? Or, deciding to skip a day of work and call in sick when you really aren't? Or school for kids? Or keeping something that doesn't belong to you because it just happens to be there – worse of course would be deliberately stealing.

Even deeper, what about judging others/criticizing? Always complaining about anything? Manipulating circumstances and people so that things go your way? Gossip? Putting others down? Blaming others?

What would you add to the list?

In today's scriptures we have two clear stories about temptation: Adam and Eve in the garden, and Jesus in the Wilderness. Both are opposite contexts. One is nirvana and the other is filled with dangers. On earth, in this material existence, it doesn't matter where you are temptations will always find you.

The essence of sin (the end result of giving into temptation) is the failure to live into our identity as beloved beings of the living God. It's not a matter of breaking rules. It's a matter of not being who we truly are created to be. Satan invites Jesus to use his connection with the Father as a kind of super power to rule, to test the limits of the Father, to feed all of human kind. Presumably the writer somehow believed that Jesus could do all of that. Perhaps he could but he wouldn't, because he wouldn't be true to the nature of divine love. Divine love does not impose itself, but instead seeks to immerse presence and life in all beings. God invites, not compels us. That is how Adam and Eve get to choose. Without conscious choice, we would be a very different kind of creature.

Temptation to be someone other than who we are uniquely and wonderfully created to be is real and present all of the time.

Some of you have heard this story before:

Once upon a time, in a not-so-faraway land, there was kingdom of acorns, nestled at the foot of a grand old oak tree. Since the citizens of this kingdom were modern, fully Westernized acorns, they went about their business with purposeful energy; and since they were midlife, baby-boomer acorns, they engaged in a lot of self-help courses. There were seminars called 'Getting all You can out of Your shell.' These were woundedness and recovery groups for acorns who had been bruised in their original fall from the tree. There were spas oiling and polishing those shells and various acornopathic therapies to enhance longevity and well-being.

One day in the midst of this kingdom there suddenly appeared a knotty little stranger, apparently dropped "out of the blue" by a passing bird. He was capless and dirty, making an immediate negative impression on his fellow acorns. And crouched beneath the oak tree, he stammered out a wild tale. Pointing upward at the tree, he said, "We ... are. . that!"

Delusional thinking, obviously, the other acorns concluded, but one of them continued to engage him in conversation: "So tell us, how would we become that tree?" "Well," said he, pointing downward, "it has something to do with going into the ground . . . and cracking open the shell." "Insane", they responded. "Totally morbid! Why, then we wouldn't be acorns anymore." ¹

This morning's readings, especially from Genesis and the Gospel of Matthew are all about our identity. Who we think we are meant to be, and how we become what we are meant to be, has major impact on our actions, our dreams and vision, our very life.

In the Book of Genesis Adam and Eve deny their identity as creatures of the living God, partners with God, given responsibility for the Divine realm that is the earth. God presents them with a choice to live into the identity that has been given them (they don't even have to earn it or do anything for it!) or to choose the path of knowing more than they need to know. In other words, to claim a different identity. The Garden has two trees: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of Life. They choose the other identity and, as we all know, are banished from the Garden of Eden – that idyllic place where they live in union with the living God. The tree of Life is the symbol of what they could have had if they had been satisfied with their original identity. The rest of the story of the Bible is about how God's people seek to reclaim their original identity as blessed people of the Living God.

Jesus, in the Gospel of Matthew, has just been proclaimed the Beloved One of God in his baptism. His time in the wilderness (like the wilderness of the Israelites) is a time for him to be in union with the Father, to allow his hunger for Divine life to dwell throughout humanity to grow. It will fuel his zeal for transformation of the people. His ability to say "no" to the temptations which were with him throughout his ministry, that is the misuse of divine power, was made possible by his clarity about who he was – a fully developed human being, living in unity with God, both human and divine.

We, as individuals and the church, are like acorns resting against the oak tree of Jesus, hoping that some of him will rub off onto us. Some of our greatest temptations have to do with our resistance to change. I don't know about you, but I keep thinking that I'm going to reach a place in life in which I can just "coast". In fact, I kind of thought that when I came here. A lot of what priests do is kind of repetitive. I've been rector before – what could be challenging about this small sleepy village? And you know, I could just throttle back and go with the

flow. It's very tempting. But it wouldn't be who God calls me to be, nor would it be what you need to continue to spiritually develop and grow. And so, we've tried new things, I'm learning about new ways of doing parish ministry and you're learning (I hope) that if the church is going to thrive in this town and through the next 100 years, it will have to break open and become something totally new.

Giving up our current identity is a kind of death. We are still living out of an old identity. There are many facets to it, but the primary characteristic, I think, is rooted in a 1950's model of the church. This is true for all the members of this church – seasonal and year round. The seasonal folks can sort of get away with it because for them this church is where they play and have their relationship with God and each other renewed each year. Most (not all) seasonal folks want the church to be here when they show up. They are not part of the ongoing conversation of being the church in the Town of Mt. Desert. That's not bad – it's simply what it is. But those of us who are here year round (and some seasonal members who are really invested) have been trying to live the old notion of the church with choir and Sunday School and church suppers and so on. And our numbers are dwindling. It's a new day and time and the value of faith is largely unknown to many. And, in truth, we need to admit that we are, at times, our own worst enemy – with bickering and criticizing, and saying negative things about our church community when we're unhappy. Who would want to be a part of such a community?

Those who are seeking want spiritual connection. And that's our challenge. Can we let go of the old identity and allow God in Christ to form us anew? Can we learn to listen to the movement of the Spirit among us. I don't know. It's tempting to keep the status quo. We know how to be acorns – but oak trees?

In this Lenten season on Wednesday nights we are going to be looking at what it might look like to be a different kind of church. I hope you will be a part of the conversation, and a part of the renewal.

Stare your temptations in the face and say “no” to them this Lent. I invite you to fast from criticizing anyone, especially the church. At the end of each day, pause for some quiet and reflection. How have you lived into your identity as beloved of God? How have you been open to the change that God is doing? How are you saying “yes” to God in Christ in your own life and the life of this church?

Amen.

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¹ *The Wisdom Way of Knowing* by Cynthia Bourgeault, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003, p. 64-65.