

# Sermon – Matthew 4.1-11, Genesis 2.15-17, 3.1-7, L1, YA, March 5, 2017

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On this first Sunday in Lent, I usually like to talk about Lenten disciplines. The season of Lent is one of the few times in the Church that we take a hard look at our faith life and then actually commit to doing something tangible to strengthen our walk with Christ. When I hear about your disciplines, I get some clue as to what feeds each of you spiritually – whether you long to connect with Holy Scripture, or hope to deepen your prayer life; whether you know that denial of certain parts of your life will create a needed discomfort or disruption, or instead find taking up something to create needed transformation; whether you are motivated by something fun and engaging (like Lent Madness), or you prefer something more philosophical (like our Lenten study group focusing on the spirituality of the Eucharist). Lenten disciplines also give me a tiny clue about what sinful behaviors have been pulling you away from God. As we prayed the Great Litany today, there were countless options: pride, vainglory, hypocrisy, envy, hatred, malice, desires of the flesh, and hardness of heart. Or, perhaps you are inspired to help one of those we prayed for in the Litany: the lonely, the sick, the homeless, the imprisoned, broken families, the oppressed, or those suffering injustice. There really is no wrong way to approach Lenten disciplines – that we are taking them on demonstrates a commitment to enriching our faith and growing closer to God.

Given the beginning of those practices, the text of Jesus' temptation every year on this first Sunday in Lent has always seemed most appropriate. How better to encourage us to engage in repentance and reformation than to remember that Jesus too was tempted – tempted to ease the discomfort of hunger,

tempted to test God's loyalty and support, and tempted to take on power – even if ill-gotten – for the greater good? And even better that this year in Lent, we get that powerful lesson from Hebrew Scriptures of Adam and Eve's temptation – the temptation to eat beautiful fruit, to learn what God knows but won't tell us, to take control of our destiny. And all of those temptations would be plenty. But what has been striking me more powerfully this year has been what is at the root of the temptations of Satan. You see, in all of those tests for Jesus, and even in the simple offering of forbidden fruit, Satan does something even more insidious. Through his temptations, Satan works to undermine our relationship with God – to sow the seed of mistrust that promises to unravel the very foundation of our faith.

We can talk all we want about deepening our faith, working on our sinful behaviors, or becoming better Christians in Lent. But much scarier to talk about is the power of evil to undo our faith altogether. Many of us know the darkness of this power from Satan. If we have not had a spiritual identity crisis in our lives, someone we know has. Enough people around us die, enough suffering happens in the world, enough pain comes our way that slowly we begin to wonder if God cares at all. We watch what Christians do to one another or how they fail to care for one another, we see the misdeeds of the Church, or the Church's clergy disappoint us, and slowly, slowly, we begin to doubt God is even present. As I have been watching the news, as our country becomes more deeply divided, as suffering seems to be epidemic, and as we dehumanize one another, sometimes institutionalizing that dehumanization, I see the power of evil planting seed after seed of mistrust. Who hasn't asked, "Where is God?" in the last year? Who hasn't thought, "Maybe I should stop trusting God, and start taking care of things myself."? Who hasn't wondered if God is slipping into irrelevance as the world falls apart around us?

As I have pondered the temptations of Adam, Eve, and Jesus, the power of evil to corrupt has been much

more powerful, potent, and pressing this year. The “crafts and assaults of the devil” and the desire to “beat down Satan under our feet”<sup>[i]</sup> we heard in the Great Litany are much more powerful in our current climate. I am much less worried about Adam and Eve’s original sin than I am worried about their original insecurity. The serpent comes along and sews mistrust among Adam and Eve. He starts out with a simple question, “Did God really say…” And so begins the serpent’s assault on their relationship with God – misrepresenting and undermining God’s instructions, suggesting God is keeping something from them. And as scholar David Lose suggests, once this primary relationship is undermined, Adam and Eve are “susceptible to the temptation to forge their identity on their own, independent on their relationship with God, and so take and eat the forbidden fruit… [They] forget whose they are and so lose themselves in the temptation to secure their identity on their own.”<sup>[ii]</sup> Though Adam and Eve’s sin is grave, how the serpent gets them there is much scarier to me.

Satan attempts to do the very same thing with Jesus. “The devil also tries to undermine Jesus’ relationship with God by suggesting [the relationship] is not secure, that he should test [the relationship] by throwing himself off the mountain, or that he should go his own way by creating food for himself, or that he should seek the protection and patronage of the devil rather than trust God’s provision.”<sup>[iii]</sup>

Satan is good! He even tries to twist Jesus’ use of scripture to convince Jesus of God’s unworthiness of trust. What is frightening about Satan’s tactics is that he is not just about tempting us to do bad things. He is meddling in our relationship with God, sewing distrust, confusion, questioning our identity as beloved children of God. And that kind of meddling leads to much worse problems than poor behavior. Satan tries to upend who we are.

Last week, we baptized two members into the household of faith. We talked about how baptism marks for us who and whose we are. We gave thanks for the reminder and celebrated as a community. We

were not unlike Adam and Eve, who upon their creation, God says it is very good. We were not unlike Jesus, who at his own baptism, which occurs immediately before his temptation today, God says, “This is my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” But Satan takes goodness and blessedness, and tries to taint that goodness and blessedness with doubt, mistrust, and insecurity. He tries to confuse us, making us forget who and whose we are.

Several years ago, the movie *The Help* debuted. In the film, there is a maid who cares for a child who gets a lot of verbal abuse from her mother. In several key scenes, the maid takes the child aside and teaches the child a mantra of sorts. In her rough grammar, she reminds the child, “You is smart, you is kind, you is important.” Eventually the maid is fired, and the audience is left hoping that the mantra she taught the child will remind her that no matter what verbal abuse she receives, she can remember who she is – smart, kind, and important.

We do not always have caretakers in our lives who will instill in us a mantra that holds us in the face of adversity. But we do have a church. We have a church that will tell us we are made in the image of God, that our very creation is rooted in goodness, and that we are beloved children of God. When we begin to be assaulted by the power of evil, which would rather us question our identity, the church reminds of us of our baptismal covenant, our identity-making set of promises, which tells us we are enough, there is plenty to go around, and we need not live in fear. While the forces of evil will try to isolate us and send us into questions of identity, the church comes together every week to remind us that we are beloved children of God – a people of value, worth, and purpose.[\[iv\]](#)

I do not know what spiritual discipline you are taking up for Lent this year. But if you do nothing else this Lent, come to church. Come gather with the community that reminds you who and whose you are. Come be with a people who are also assaulted by the doubts, questions, and fears of the day, but who

ground themselves in their identity, and find meaning, encouragement, and purpose in this place.

Come. Together, we will stamp down Satan under our feet as we shine light on our God who redeems, renews, and renews us. Amen.

[i] BCP, 151-152.

[ii] David Lose, "Lent 1A: Identity as Gift and Promise," February 28, 2017, as found at <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/02/lent-1-a-identity-as-gift-and-promise/> on March 2, 2017.

[iii] Lose.

[iv] Lose.