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St. Christopher's Episcopal Church
Genesis 3; March 4; 1st Sunday of Lent
March 1, 2020

Good morning. Yes the sermon is a bit out of place. For this season of Lent we are flipping the order of the sermon and the gospel because our gospel readings assigned are particularly long this season. This week's is short but they will eventually be almost 40 verses long. So I have found preaching on the gospel before you hear it when it is that long actually helps you understand it more deeply. Though this week's gospel isn't as much of a challenge in length, I'm a Type A person and I can't make a change for every Sunday but one of a liturgical season.

Have no fear friends who like to hear the gospel before the preacher lends their own interpretation upon it. You know this gospel passage well - we begin every season of Lent with it. It is the story of Jesus spending 40 days in the desert at the end of which the devil shows up and tempts him three times to show his stuff; each time he declines. It is paired with an equally familiar story, that of the third chapter of Genesis in which Adam and Eve are tempted in the Garden of Eden. The settings couldn't be more different. The Garden of Eden is a place where all one's needs are taken care of. Food in abundance. Safety. Companionship. In the desert, Jesus finds himself with nothing - no food, no drink, no one. Certainly not safe. These very different situations are each a backdrop for temptation.

The stories share something else; immediately preceding each of these stories God announces the goodness of each of them. Just prior to going into the desert, Jesus was baptized and the skies opened and the voice heard, "This is my son with whom I am well pleased." Well pleased. It doesn't get much better than that in terms of divine affirmation. Adam and Eve heard more of God's collective pleasure. After the creation of all there is, they had the pleasure of hearing that it was good, after each day of creation, God says, "it is good."

Affirmed in their goodness, Adam and Eve frolic in utopia. Affirmed in his goodness, Jesus enters the starkness of the desert. They are both tempted which gets us to the first reality of temptation. You can be tempted when everything is going well and when everything is not - when you have everything you need, and when you have nothing of what you need and everything in between. Temptation is not an indication of anything other than you are alive.

It isn't really fair to compare Jesus to Adam and Eve due to Jesus' special status. Plus Adam and Eve's story is one of myth that is meant to reveal something about human nature, or more the perception of human nature by people 3000 years ago. Nonetheless, I think comparing them does bring something out about the truth of temptation. Temptation entices us by telling us we could be better, our life could be better, if we just "blank." Adam and Eve, your life will be better if you knew more? I love the pursuit of knowledge; I'm a big advocate for it, but all knowledge doesn't make you better - Adam and Eve find this; they become self-conscious about their nakedness. Not a real win for them.

In the desert, Satan tempts Jesus by inviting him to prove who he is - to show who he is and his power. To do these things that no normal human could do. It is not enough for you and God to know who you are, your life will be better if you show it. A prominent 20th century spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen, linked the three temptations that Jesus faces in the desert to three lies people tell themselves about who they are. The first – “tell these stones to become bread” is the temptation to believe the lie – “I am what I do.” The second – “All this I will give you” – is the temptation to believe the lie “I am what I have.” The third – “throw yourself down and let the angels catch you so not a scratch is on you” - make a spectacle of how special you are - is the temptation to believe the lie “I am what others say or think about me.” While none of us believe we could actually do these temptations, we are all tempted to connect our worth to the lies - “I am what I do,” “I am what I have”, “I am what others think or say about me.” I am what I do is easy enough to identify; I am what I have can include not only money and possessions, but security, even knowledge; it’s the temptation that Adam and Eve faced - you will be better if you have more knowledge. I am what others think or say about me is how we stereotypically think of teenagers and the importance they place on their peers, but adults are just as susceptible to identifying themselves by the feedback loop they get from others whether their children or spouse or others. This is part of the human condition; evolutionarily speaking it is very helpful to care about what you do, what you have, how others relate to you.

Caring though is not the same as linking your worth to it. Because who we are is not what we do, or have, or what others see us as— who you are is a child of God. That is the source of your worth and identity. This is how Jesus responds to each temptation - with words of Scripture that

link his worth and identity back to God. Each and every time. This is how Jesus resists temptation - by reminding himself who he is and whose he is. This is what Adam and Eve fail to do - to see that their worth and identity is safely in God even when they are standing in the Garden of Eden. They don't need to look outside of God to find themselves. They are good; they are enough; trust it.

Temptation is not the only thing that entices us by telling us that we could be better. Jesus' call to follow him offers the same promise, so does repentance, a theme emphasized strongly on Ash Wednesday and throughout Lent. These things tell us that we can be better by listening to who God calls us to be. They are pointing towards our worth and purpose in God, not away from it as temptation does. The difference between temptation and growth is clear when Satan is talking but few of get so obvious of a clue. It is also easy to spot when when know what we are being tempted to do is bad - like shoplifting or cheating on a test or cutting corners in a job assignment. We may try to justify ourselves but we know its wrong. Murkier are other temptations surrounding good or neutral things - sacrificing to get a job promotion, or pulling away from relationships that are making you uncomfortable for whatever reason - are you being selfish or are you being who you are called to be. The distinction is hard to figure out. Those are the far more frequent temptations of our lives.

It's why I think self-denial became such a core practice to Lent. It's much more trendy to take something on during Lent in the last decade. Scripture reading or praying daily or an adult

education. That's fine and good and worthwhile too, but self-denial has been a traditional part of Lent for a reason, and I think it is particularly helpful in cultivating a heart to resist the murkier temptations of life. It is the core practice that God gives Adam and Eve really. It isn't that God is worried about the consequences of Adam and Eve knowing they are naked that concerns God. It is their failure to trust him completely that he is concerned about. So he gives them a practice of self-denial that they may practice making the daily choice to trust him; every time they see that tree and choose not to eat from it they are practicing trusting him. It doesn't have to do with not eating from the tree. When we deny ourselves something we typically take comfort in or that disrupts our routine, we are invited to take comfort in, to trust in, God on a daily basis. To practice what that feels like. So that when we face the murkier temptations of life, we know what it feels like to have our trust drawn away from God. Noticing that feeling will help us to resist that which is temptation for us.

There's a prominent church whose mission is specifically to the unchurched, and their tag line goal is to help people "make better choices and have fewer regrets." As tag lines go, it is a pretty good one when we think about resisting temptation. It's not about avoiding a divine punishment from God. There's no garden to cast you out of. We don't believe heaven is dangled out as a prize by an all-loving God to those who earn more pluses than negatives in the game of life. Resisting temptation is important because it helps us to find ourselves in that which truly defines us and tells us who we are. You are not what you do. You are not what you have. You are not what others think of you. You are good. You are a beloved child of God. Now live like it.