

First Sunday of Lent, 2017 “What would God have us do?” *Based on: Genesis 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7 Matt 4: 1-11*

What is Lent for you? I rather think of Lent as an opportunity to do a personal spring cleaning, a time to look beyond our own physical desires and wants, which we tend to default to in our day to day lives, and deliberately take some time to see to our spiritual sides. I’ve heard it said that Lent can be a time of stripping down to the essentials—time to think about things like, what do we really need? Hence the idea of fasting: traditionally only one meal a day and only basic foods. It’s a good time to also look beyond ourselves and consider the needs of others less fortunate than ourselves. Our desire to want the things we are ‘giving-up’ helps us to think about those who are really in need—and then give to them! It also gives opportunity to strengthen our own personal resolves that tend to weaken when we deny ourselves something we really love—for me its sweets. And of course make a concerted effort to reconnect with our God, like a tune up for our own souls, fortifying us for the challenges life brings. We can read something spiritually or faith oriented books or articles and be intentional in setting aside time for daily prayer. Does sound like a bit of nuisance, a bit of an effort, doesn’t it to thinking about what to do, how to do it and make the time for it?

Why should we bother with Lent anyway? I know there are some Christian denominations that don’t “do Lent”. Is it really worth the effort? Our lives can be busy and so full -- so many things to do, we have so many balls in the air that need to be juggled just to keep up. And it’s exhausting and we often go into autopilot mode, just to deal and cope with everything. And we forget that we are God’s children, brothers and sisters to Jesus, and that Holy Spirit is there to help us, to lead us. Lent provides us with the reminder that God should really come first in our lives, and in our busyness we forget that! Now, it’s not as though we can take off for a 40 day wilderness retreat, but trying to carve out a few minutes each day to pray or read a scripture, consider the needs of others and how we can respond to Christ’s call to care for the poor, well honestly, that can only be a good thing! These 40 days of Lent are also a good time for some personal reflection—how well are we actually responding to God’s will for us. Are we God centered in how we live our lives, or self-centered or other centered—culturally motivated by how our society dictates we should live? Do we follow in Christ’s footsteps or are we on another path entirely? What guides us? Our will and desires, society’s dictates or God’s will for us?

And, you know, these are the same kinds of issues in our Genesis story for today. Today’s story is about motivations and relationships. Now, it’s no secret that historically Eve has been accused of Adam’s down fall, of leading Adam into succumbing to the temptation to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge in the centre of the Garden of Eden. What is often missed—or ignored --is Adam’s role in this entire encounter. Where is Adam when this little tête-à-tête between the snake and Eve is going down? Genesis 3:6 --“...her husband ... was with her” He is right there, the whole time, and says nothing, does nothing. When Eve says: “Hey hubby, want a bite?” Adam, without even a word of protest, yields to the temptation as much as Eve did, and he eats the fruit. Adam could have said no, if he chose to. He was responsible for his own actions. There is no recording of Eve tempting him, or seducing him into temptation, which is what has been depicted in art and in the retelling of this story over the centuries. And let’s remember, it is just a story, there’s a talking snake after all! This is meant to be an allegory. So the question that comes to mind is why did Adam eat the forbidden fruit, why didn’t Adam even say a word, or try to stop Eve from picking and eating the fruit which he knew was specifically against God’s commands? Or even just suggest they walk away from this smart talking snake of a salesman? Why did he eat the proffered fruit? ***Because he wanted it as much as she did!***

They were both in this, together. They both wanted to know what it would be like to have the knowledge of God, and the power of God, Adam just as badly as Eve did. And this is what this story is really about, succumbing to temptation of power—a temptation that is so strong that even the pain of death doesn’t stop them! “Don’t be silly”, the snake says, “Eating the fruit of the forbidden tree won’t kill you. God just doesn’t want you to know all the things that God knows, God’s keeping that to Godself.” One biblical commentator notes that “The serpent’s question (Did God say, You shall not

eat from any tree in the garden? *Gen 3.1*) is has (a specific) intention. It is an invitation (for Adam and Eve) to question the command of God.”¹ The snake presents the opportunity for Adam and Eve to question God’s love and care for them, question their ability to trust God and what God was telling them. You can almost hear them thinking: “If God really cared for us, why would God deny us the fruit of a really beautiful tree with delectable fruit, a tree that would give us knowledge—that’s not fair, not right! We can eat it if we want to, and then we too will know as much as God does—the snake said so, and he sounded like he knew what he was talking about!”

And that was the temptation that lured them. ‘You will be like God.’ This is really a story of giving into the temptation of wanting to be in total control of our own lives and destiny, to be our own little Gods, to follow our own wills and desires, instead of God’s good desires for us, which are really what God’s commands are, after all. And this is the desire, the temptation, to which all of us, in our human condition, fall prey to, and are continually tempted to.

And these are the same temptations that Jesus is tested with in his desert wilderness experience, to take power into his own hands. Jesus knowingly went into the desert, led by the Spirit, fully aware that in his humanity, he would be tested and in severe circumstances and long enough to become weakened, susceptible to being challenged at the core level of his being. But remember, when did Jesus go into the desert? After his baptism, after the Spirit of God had come upon him. He went into testing fortified by the Spirit.

Here’s an interesting thought, the only source for this story must have been Jesus himself, Jesus had to have told others this story for it to be written in the gospels. No one else was present when this happened, just Jesus and the devil, and you can bet the devil wouldn’t want this story to get much press! Jesus must have wanted this story to be told, he wanted people to know that even he, the son of God had to overcome the same worldly temptations as they did.

How easy it would have been for Jesus to turn those stones into nice fresh bread, he was famished. And if he jumped off the temple, Jesus could have figured that God would save him from being dashed against the rocks—wouldn’t that be something to prove to that Devil. And to own and be in control of all the kingdoms of the world, -- he was the Son of God, and to own all that, now, wouldn’t that turn people’s heads and show them God was all powerful! What would you say if I told you we have those very same temptations still today?

1. Unlimited food, not many of us here don’t have enough food to eat, in fact--goodness knows many of us, me included, eat far more than we need and to our own detriment!
2. Testing God – I think we all do it sometimes, especially when we want to abdicate responsibility, we say something like: “Ok God, that’s your problem now, I’m not worrying about it anymore,” “Or, that’s too big for me to worry about.”—like say, world hunger? Or sometimes you hear people say “Must be all part of God’s plan. All things happen for a reason.” There’s a real difference between a genuine leap of faith or dumping on God so we don’t own the responsibility for the action ourselves.
3. The desire to own lots of splendid possessions, the more the better, people who have many things are seen as successful and powerful, aren’t they?

What was at the core of all three of these temptations? What was the biggest test of all? Power. Jesus had the power to be able to do any of those three things. It was well within his power to do any or all of what the devil presented him, like it is often within our power to decide what we are going to do—or not do. It’s easy to justify pretty well anything when we choose to, like the devil tried with Jesus. The real question is “What would God have us do?”

The Rev. JoAnn Todd, The Anglican Parish of Hanover - Durham

¹ Allen C. McSween Jr. in *Pastoral Perspective for the First Sunday in Lent Yr A* in [Feasting on the Word Yr A Volume 2](#) (WJKPress:Louisville Kentucky) p.m 28