

Lent 1, Year A (RCL)  
February 26, 2023  
New Song Church  
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Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7  
Psalm 32  
Romans 5:12-19  
Matthew 4:1-11

## Temptation

A preacher once stood before his congregation and said, "Today I want to talk about sin." And in the shortest sermon ever, he continued, "I'm agin it," and he sat down.

Don't get your hopes up – I have a bit more to say about the matter given that today's lessons seem to have a great deal to say about temptation, sin, and repentance. Here, on this first Sunday of Lent, the lectionary texts set the tone for the penitential season of Lent in these weeks leading up to Easter when we are invited to sit with our sin – to acknowledge it, to contemplate its consequences, to ask forgiveness, to learn from our shortcomings, and try to do better in the future.

We find scripture's "Best of Temptation Stories" in in today's readings from Genesis and Matthew. The first, from Genesis, marks a pivot point in human history, when people first begin to question whether the boundaries God has set are meant to protect us, or to restrict our freedom. "Is God holding out on us?" they seem to ask. "Maybe there is something more – something better that we are missing out on. . ." Yearning for freedom and wholeness, the first humans yield to temptation and choose self-determination over God's gracious offer of an uncomplicated life lived in paradise in right

relationship with one another and with the Creator. Consequently, we humans have been searching for that “something more” ever since that day in the proverbial garden, and the rifts in our relationships with God and one another have deepened considerably. The grace that we find in the Genesis story is that God does not give up on us but remains in relationship with us despite our disobedience.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness marks a pivot-point in his life and ministry. Thus far in Matthew, we’ve learned of Jesus’ birth, the visits of the Magi, the family’s flight into Egypt to escape the wrath of King Herod, and their eventual return to Nazareth. In the space between Matthew 2 and 3, Jesus grows into adulthood, along with his cousin John who is introduced now as the rather eccentric John the Baptist. Jesus presents himself to John to be baptized. As Barbara Brown Taylor notes, “No sooner did (Jesus) come up out of the water than the dove that had lit on him turned into a guide bird, leading him away from the river and into the wilderness with the voice of God still ringing in his ears: ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’”<sup>1</sup>

In the wilderness, it seems that God had some tests in store for Jesus before his ministry could begin. The devil was assigned as the proctor. In the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights with nothing to eat or drink and no smart phone to pass the time with, Jesus had plenty of time to reflect on his life and to get a sense of who he was. “The Beloved.” That was who he was, wasn’t it? God had called him The Beloved, but 40 days later it is hard to imagine that he felt terribly beloved, abandoned by God in the desert, hungry, alone, and subjected to the wiles of the devil. Though looking back,

we can see that these were the very things that helped him shape his values, his principles, and most of all, his relationship to God.

“If you are the Son of God,” the devil chides, “command these stones to become loaves of bread.” “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the pinnacle of this temple – God will protect you.” And then the devil makes his final offer while they stand atop a tall mountain surveying the splendor of all the kingdoms of the world, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

Jesus resists each of these temptations and passes his General Ordination Exams. The one who, in his ministry would feed 5,000 with seven loaves and a few fish to satisfy the hunger of a crowd of followers, refuses to magically create bread to satisfy his own hunger. The one who would one day be taunted by those witnessing his crucifixion, “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross” refuses both now and then to call on God for special privileges that might seem his right. The one who’s ministry would be marked by turning worldly power upside down, elevating the lowest members of society – women, the poor, lepers, adulterers, convicts – to places of esteem, turns the devil down on his offer of political power and prestige. That’s not who he is and not who he wants to be. He knows that now with the clarity that can only come from being on the other side of adversity. For us as Matthew’s readers, the stage is set. We now know who Jesus is and what to expect from his ministry. Jesus is tempted as we all are, but unlike us, he will not cave to the appeals of putting his own needs, ego, or aspirations ahead of his devotion to God. His power will be expressed in his

humility and his love in his sacrifice.

As the season of Lent begins, we are invited to think of this time as a gift of our own wilderness experience – 40 days to devote to prayer, simplicity, self-examination, contemplation. A time to focus on the needs of others. 40 days to resist temptations of putting ourselves first, of always hungering for more than what we already have, and of seeking the admiration of others whatever the cost. 40 days to connect more deeply with the God who sees us for who we are, who knows that we are but dust, and yet calls and claims each of us as beloved.

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<sup>i</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor in her sermon, “The Wilderness Exam,” from her book *Bread of Angels*, page 36.