

Feb. 26, 2023

Pr. Steve

Texts: Genesis 2: 15-17; 3: 1-7; Matthew 4: 1-11

In the name of God, Abba/Imma, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

At this beginning of the Lenten season, I asked Melinda [musician] this week to find us music of temptation. Anything that was really, you know, tempting--and then we could find out who the nasty people are in this congregation. She couldn't find any in our hymnal. I guess that means we're all good people.

The testing in the desert of Jesus reminds us of the testing of the Israelites on their trek through the desert. Are we doomed? Are we stuck forever in the old ruts, being enslaved to the lives we've known, or is a breakthrough possible? Can new life, new hope, a new future begin here, among us, now? Faith is always asking, isn't it? *'Is it possible?'*

The Roman Empire was built on the Devil's three temptations:

First, bread and circuses for the masses. Keep them happy. Keep them dancing, keep them distracted. It works...

Second, outsmart your rivals, and crush your enemies by intrigue, or the raw power of war... whatever you need.

And third, unify the nation by patriotism and religious fervor. Participate in the cult of the Goddess Roma. *'O Roma, whose divine son was the Caesar--just pay attention to him.'* Can you imagine such a thing? They called it *Pax Romana*, the Peace of Rome. But as one British, conquered king of that time, 2000 years ago, said, *'Rome creates a desert, and then calls it peace.'*

Any equivalents in our time? Of course, we have our modern version.

First, globalization. *'It will be good for everybody.'* As I said, a couple weeks ago, it's approaching, approaching, 20% of humanity is better off now.

Second, our dazzling technology will save the people and the planet--just trust it, right? I mean, it's on TV every day, isn't it?

And third, celebrate exceptionalism. Celebrate that we have geniuses in our midst, and just pay attention to them. What we need are more Steve Jobs and Elon Musks and Bill Gates, and Warren Buffett, and maybe a couple presidents, right? *'They'll save us--because we're an exceptional people.'* I've heard that, haven't you?

Jesus is led into the desert. One of the most brilliant things about our Scriptures (that we share with Jewish friends) is that there is never an attempt throughout the entire Scriptures to explain what evil is or where it comes from. It just

acknowledges--*'it's here, something's wrong, something's off.'* Look out for people who will explain to you where evil is coming from. Look out! Nobody knows; that is dangerous.

He fasts for 40 days and nights, and he is hungry. Now, actually this testing is a summing up of the whole of Jesus' life already, his adolescence, young manhood--what people like to call the 'hidden years'. What was going on? This is spiritual quest. Our stories for today, that inner scrutiny going on inside of Jesus, his own self experiment, his own self-examination at the depths. *Who am I? What am I becoming?*

The three challenges before him are also our three tests for a lifetime. These underlie, and engage, and challenge Jesus for the whole of his lifetime. And it is the subtlety of these three tests which makes them most insidious--each a slight, but fatal, distortion of Jesus' mission, like the snake's question. *"Did God say you can't eat of any of the fruit trees in the garden?"*

*"No,"* Eve corrects him. *'Just that tree in the middle.'* Enticement (subtle, subtle), playing the games, playing the heart. *"Why would God say such a thing to you?"*

*'Just turn some stones into bread'*--people like to eat, don't we? And aren't we called to feed people. Life is more than food. And Jesus says in the Beatitudes, *'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for God's justice.'* It's the relationship with God, which is important.

So, the devil lifts him up into the mountains and shows him in a glance--all the realms of the world in their glory. *'Bow down, and I'll give you Las Vegas. It's all yours. New York at night. It's all yours. Just honor me, and I will give you the authority over all these people. Don't you want some power?'* The temptation: *Be a king--without suffering.* And that's how power works in this world: *'Everybody else is going to pay the price, but not me.'*

Jesus says, *'Worship God alone.'* That's our focus. That's the key to our own integrity and wholeness. And elsewhere he says, *'The greatest among you will serve even the least, because this life is not about power.'*

So, [the Devil] takes him to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem, that great city of power, and cutting deals, and corruption. And this is the most dangerous of the Temptations, because it's a test of Jesus' divine calling. *'Just jump to the ground. Show people who you are. They don't know yet. They need a clue. Just let them see. God will protect you. God has promised to protect us, right?'*

Now, the real challenge for the Devil is not the earthly rule of Jesus. It is [Jesus'] relationship with God, the Abba/Imma. This is what Jesus never severs. (We go back and forth, understandably.) His heart at all costs remains focused on that relationship. *'I do nothing without Abba/Imma's guidance. The Abba/Imma loves me,'* Jesus says, *'and shows me what to do, how to live, how to speak, what's at stake.'*

The devil is simply trying to get Jesus to repeat Eve's error: *'You can become godlike.'* Anybody here not want that gift? And this is the brilliance, the penetrating brilliance, of this Scripture. To know the difference between Good and Evil--don't we all want to live with that? Because we do know the difference between good and evil, don't we? Do we? That's the heart surgery that's going on inside of us, the wisdom of the season of Lent, that deeper examination. Depends on whose perspective, doesn't it? Who's seeing us, with what kind of understanding? Are we the good people all the time? Hardly.

We don't want to pretend about this. But in light of our Confession today, I've taken great consolation from a theologian friend of mine (who actually Martha knew, George Hoyer), who said many years ago, *"Christians actually consider themselves honorary sinners."* *'Of course, we're all sinners.'* *That's just... Oh yeah, you can't exclude yourself from the club, but we're honorary sinners. There's no changes we have to go through. We're part of a church.'* Insidious! Dangerous! Look out! This is what Jesus is facing today. Jesus refuses to participate. He says, *'Don't experiment with God. Don't play games with God.'*

We want bread. We want miracles. We want authorities to tell us what to do because we want life to become bearable. Is that asking too much?

Jesus doesn't make life bearable—that's not what he's here for. *It's rather revealing who we are, and whose we are. And that we can never be separated from God, the merciful.*

The Devil left Jesus, and the angels came and fed him--like manna in the desert. Then he began his ministry. Amen.

The peace, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.