

The First Sunday in Lent | February 26, 2023

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 | Psalm 32 | Romans 5:12-19 | Matthew 4:1-11 | The Rev. Barnabas Pusnur

We are in the season of Lent. Lent in the Old English meant spring. So lent etymologically means springtime! Spring season, even if we're not there yet, should be a time of joy, growth and new beginnings. But that doesn't really match with how we view Lent, does it? Isn't lent a serious time of penitence, fasting, prayer, guilt, and repentance? My first education in understanding the liturgical calendar came when I was volunteering to teach the children in Godly Play at this church. The Godly Play stories were my primary textbooks to understand some liturgical ideas. The Godly Play curriculum rightly points out that Lent as a season only exists because of Easter. Lent is just a time to get ready for the great celebration of the mystery of Easter. Lent only makes sense in the context of the hope of the resurrection of Jesus. It only makes sense in the context of the love of Jesus exhibited on the cross and the abundant forgiveness that only God provides. And so, it is in the context of hope, love and forgiveness, we in the season of Lent do the work of reflection on our own lives, repenting of sin, and turning to God.

This week's scripture readings are stories of sin and temptation. From the book of Genesis, we hear about the temptation that Adam and Eve faced and their consequent sin. And in the Gospel, we hear about the temptation that Jesus faced and his consequent victory. But what is temptation and sin?

Temptation seems so basic and universal, that it's hard to talk about it seriously. We smile at the temptation to splurge on our simple vanities and small pleasures. And yet, temptation also manifests itself in the human proclivity that sometimes leads to unimaginable harm to oneself and others. Temptation in that context is the desire to not just indulge in something that is more or less harmless, rather it is an urge that if acted upon can cause great damage and harm.

The fact that temptation is universal, is evident in that in both the stories, one of the first things that the scriptures records about

the first humans and Jesus in their public lives is that they were tempted. The Genesis account says that soon after God created Adam & Eve, he put them in a garden, and the first event that occurs is that they are tempted to disobey God. Likewise, the Gospel shows that Jesus who has just been baptized and has not even started his public ministry is immediately led to a wilderness to be tempted. One would expect that after God created Adam and Eve in his image, we would read about how they flourish. Rather the first thing they encounter is temptation. One would expect that after God opens the heavens at Jesus' baptism and says "This is my beloved Son", we would see some amazing work and teaching of Jesus bursting forth. Instead, Jesus is first led to be tempted.

It's hard to be sure why in both the stories temptation should be right at the beginning of the narrative plot. It seems intentional and necessary in some ways. It's as if temptation is not an accident but is intended by God for humans to experience. Genesis says God put the first humans in the garden, a place where temptation was waiting for them. The Gospel is more direct and says that Jesus was led by the Spirit to the wilderness to be tempted. God is setting the stage or directly leading them to be tempted. Temptation here seems to be educational or a necessary step for growth.

Temptation also seems to arise in differing contexts. In the Garden of Eden, there was plenty to eat. About the garden Genesis says: "the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food." Contrast this with Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Wilderness is a place where there is no tree that is pleasant to the sight or good for food. Adam and Eve might have been enjoying eating from all the trees before they were tempted to eat from the tree God told them not to. In contrast, Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights and the Gospel says, "he was famished." Temptation can occur in both plenty and lack, it seems to be something very basic to human experience.

I find another common thread between both these temptation stories. Both temptations seem to be self-serving, self-centered, and self-obsessed. It was a desire to seek one's own pleasure at any cost. Adam and Eve were fascinated that the prohibited tree "was good for food, delight for the eyes, desirable to make one wise." The allurements of the gratification it would give the self was very strong. They were no longer thinking of the cost of acting on this desire of self-serving pleasure. The cost God said would be death, not an immediate physical death, for they did not physically die after eating the fruit, but death as a break in their relationship with God and a separation from the intimacy that they enjoyed with God. The cost of going against the explicit command of God and breaking the trust and responsibility God had placed on them. Jesus was tempted three times, and each of the temptations was also self-serving, self-centered, and self-obsessed. The tempter said use the divine powers you have in order to satisfy your craving for food by turning the stones to bread. Use your privileged relationship with God and perform the spectacle of jumping from the top of the temple and see how God will protect you. Use an easy route and bow to me and the I'll give you all the kingdoms and their splendor. The temptation was basically you can enjoy food, protection, fame and all the splendor of the world by using your special powers and opportunities. The goal of the temptation was self-serving.

This, I believe, was the sin that they were tempted to, a desire to be so self-serving that one exclusively seeks one's own pleasure at any cost, even going against God. And that indeed is the definition of sin. I often go to the Catechism printed at the end of the Book of Common Prayer to read about some theological concepts. The Catechism, which is an outline of the Christian faith in question-and-answer form, asks in one question: "What is sin?" The answer given is "Sin is the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation." It is the seeking of our own will in opposition to God's thereby destroying our relationship with God, people, and all creation. To this 'all creation' may I add it destroys our relationship with our own selves. Sin distorts our own self-perception; it distorts how we relate to the beautiful image of God that we are.

Adam and Eve yield to the self-serving temptation and so we get the first human sin. This leads to the consequent distortion of all relationships. A death, a break, a separation from God. There is a break in the relationship with the rest of creation which they enjoyed in the garden. There is a break in how they saw themselves. They were ashamed of their nakedness.

In contrast, Jesus refuses to abuse his powers and use his special position to serve himself. If you make a list of all the miracles of Jesus in the New Testament, and there are about 40 instances where Jesus exercises his divine powers, not one instance, not one example is there when the exercise of that power was self-serving. From healing to feeding to calming the storms, it was all to serve others. Jesus shows us a new way. A way to resist temptation by seeking not our own will but God's so that we can flourish in our relationship with God, people, and creation, including ourselves. A way of life that is not self-serving but serving God and our neighbors.

But if we like our first ancestors have yielded to temptation and sinned, that doesn't mean there is no hope left. Paul in his letters to the Romans in today's reading says that if from the sin of our earliest ancestors, death—a separation from God—entered the world, a separation experienced by all since all have sinned, then be assured that through the righteousness of Jesus a reconciliation and restoration is also made possible for all. He says: "If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ."

There is no true observance of Lent without the hope of life and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. The Psalm that we sang today does not say happy or blessed are they who have not sinned, instead its opening lines are "Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sin is put away!" Blessed are you whose sins are forgiven, whose sin God put away through his abundant love. May this be a blessed Lent, a blessed 'spring' for all of us, as we continue to prepare for the mystery of Easter. Amen.