

**March 1, 2020**  
**“Remembering Who(se) We Are”**  
**Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 & Matthew 4:1-11**  
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There's a *New Yorker* cartoon that shows a God figure (sadly, though predictably, portrayed as an old, bearded white guy wearing a robe and sandals), arms folded, standing in front of what is identified as a buffet restaurant, and standing next to a sandwich board that reads “All You Can Eat . . . (Except of the Tree of Knowledge) . . . \$12.99.”

It's funny right? It hardly seems fair, as the story is told in the book Genesis. You have freedom to choose, just don't choose this one thing. Over there. Right in the middle of the garden where you can't miss it. With the neon lights. And the shiny, delightful-looking fruit.

This feels more like a set-up. If God is the parent, it just seems like, well, lazy parenting. Rather than having a thoughtful conversation with the “children”—Eve and Adam—about why they should avoid the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God just says don't eat from it. Don't even touch it! And we all understand, of course, how much more tempting forbidden fruit can be.

Nevertheless, this familiar story from Genesis is not primarily a story about God. Historically, it's been interpreted as a story about humanity, an indictment on the human characters, Eve and Adam.

Within the confines of traditional Christian interpretation, it's understood—literally even—as the story of the “fall.” The fall from grace, the introduction of “sin” into the human condition. Forever after defined by our in, and with it, shame, guilt and the need for redemption. As the apostle Paul argues in today's lectionary reading from Romans, which we did not read this morning, it is the fall from which Jesus eventually came to save us: “Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.”

Now we don't have time to unpack this distorted, and harmful—though obviously widespread—theology, but I want to suggest this morning that the story from Genesis is less about falling and more about growing up! It's a story about coming into consciousness, the same way that children do as they get older. Consciousness, as the story suggests, that is defined by knowledge of good and evil. And the related knowledge that both we, and therefore the world, contain capacity for either. The serpent tells Eve that in partaking of the forbidden fruit they will be like God, but the truth is they are already like God, *imago dei*, created in God's image—Genesis, chapter 1. They just don't realize it yet.

In partaking of the forbidden fruit, it seems to me that their eyes are simply opened to a more complex and realistic understanding of themselves and of the world in which they live. They are neither good nor bad, just human.

It's also a story about the freedom to choose. We get to decide—individually and collectively—which rules to follow and which not, but there are, of course, consequences either way, for ourselves and for each other. “We are cursed with the blessing of consciousness and choice,” writes Parker Palmer, “a two-edged sword that both divides us and can help us become whole. Choosing wholeness, which sounds like a good thing, turns out to be risky business, making us vulnerable in ways we would prefer to avoid.”

Eden is not real. It's wishful thinking, a fantasy we all carry at some level, at some point, to live without vulnerability, without pain, without suffering, without fear, without loss, without death even. We are naked, figuratively speaking, and so often our instinct is to grab the fig leaf and cover up.

God says you will die the day you eat of the fruit, but that was also already true—not literally, of course, just generally. We are all going to die. Eve and Adam just have to come to that at-first difficult truth on their own, again, as children do. Maybe God, after all, wanted them, needed them, to eat of the fruit so that they would understand? On Ash Wednesday each year, as also this past week, we are reminded of our mortality: “you come from dust, and to dust you will return.”

The serpent tells Eve that she will not die, but that, of course, is a false promise. Even as we understand its appeal, temptation is marked by false promise.

Life is not about immortality and it is not about perfection, and so this story is not one about a fall from perfection, but rather a release from such an illusion and a move toward the fullness of life—in all of its beauty and all of its brokenness. Again from Parker Palmer: “Wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life.” The brokenness and limitations in our own lives. The brokenness and limitations in the world around us.

And so when Eve and Adam are eventually banished from Eden, they are not being punished. They are just being pushed into the world with a deeper understanding of its complexity and their own, its vulnerability and their own. But also, I like to think, with a deeper understanding of the privilege and power they carry to choose how they will live into that world, and “labor” to bring life into that world, as those made in God’s image. As the law and the prophets and Jesus will eventually affirm, there is in the choosing—again, individually and collectively—always both the possibility of turning away from loving relationship with ourselves, each other, the earth, the divine (which is what “sin” is) and the invitation to move more closely toward (and, as needed, turn back toward, which is what “repentance” is) loving relationship with ourselves, each other, the earth, the divine. That is what’s at stake, and that is hard work. But it is our work to do.

Which brings us to the Gospel reading, again this week from Matthew. Having experienced Jesus’ dramatic transfiguration on the mountain last week, we rewind as we lean into Lent—from Transfiguration to Temptation. This, for many of you, is likely also a familiar story.

We’re told that Jesus is “led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” – the devil, like the serpent, representing the capacity within each of us to make choices based on false promises, whether those promises are presented by external or internal voices.

The Spirit is moving within Jesus, and so he heads out into the wilderness. And he fasts for, you heard it, 40 days and 40 nights (again, the deliberate reference to Moses and the entire Exodus story!). Forty days and 40 nights, only at the end of which, when Jesus is “famished,” does the devil—now, in our reading, translated as “the tempter”—show up. The devil shows up, as temptation so often does, when we are most vulnerable. Physically,

mentally, emotionally, spiritually. Because what is temptation but a settling, a perceived shortcut to what we most deeply need, to what we most deeply desire. A short-sighted, short-term, even immediate, fix, often at the expense of long-term well-being. Wholeness, Parker Palmer would say.

And the tempter presents Jesus with three propositions. Three choices. The classic scenario. The same is true in the gospel of Luke, though in a different order. Mark's gospel provides no such detail, simply saying in two short verses, "And the Spirit immediately drove (not "led" as in Matthew's account) him out in the wilderness. He was in the wilderness 40 days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." That's it!

But in Matthew and Luke, the devil cuts right to the heart of Jesus' vulnerability. His hunger. "If, if, if . . . you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

Now as a brief aside, I have to say here that I have long maintained that the only commercials that are truly effective are pizza commercials. Whenever I see one, at just that point, or maybe just beyond that point, when I realize I'm actually hungry, or will be in 30 minutes or so, it is tempting to make that call. Amen!

"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Surely the Jesus who can turn water into wine can turn stones into bread. Delicious, mouth-watering bread. And what would be the harm in that?

But that is not what Jesus chooses to do. "It is written," he says, quoting from Deuteronomy and referencing the manna raining down from heaven to feed the hungry Israelites, "'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Jesus knows who he is. And Jesus knows whose he is. Remember that just before this story—as the author of Matthew's gospel arranges the larger narrative—is Jesus' baptism. Jesus' baptism, during which, you'll recall, the voice of God, the same voice of God we heard again at the scene of mountaintop transfiguration last week, declares Jesus as beloved Son. Same voice, same message.

Jesus is God's beloved. And as we talked about a few Sundays ago, when you are beloved, which you are, which we all are, you do not have to prove yourself! To anyone! Just be yourself!

Jesus knows who he is and whose he is. He makes a choice from a deeper place, with a longer view.

And so the devil—as temptation often does—persists. He tries to pull Jesus off his center. “Taking” him to the holy city, what Luke’s gospel confirms is, of course, Jerusalem, the devil “places” him on the “pinnacle of the temple,” the holy place, and says, “If (again, if, if, if, prove yourself!) . . . if “you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written . . . “ And here we see that the devil has done some homework.

“‘God will command (God's) angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” Quoting the Psalms.

And Jesus responds to him, verse 7 now, “Again it is written (quoting again from Deuteronomy, the commandments), ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

God does not need to prove Godself. You know: I am who I am, I will be what I will be. Jesus does not need to prove himself. Jesus knows who he is, and whose he is.

And so then the third and final temptation, for now, this time again atop a very high mountain, with a view of all the kingdoms of the world and “their splendor.” These could all be yours, the devil suggests, “if you will fall down and worship me.” Not “If you are the Son of God” this time, perhaps just trying a different approach since that approach is clearly not working?

But Jesus stands firm, he holds his center, he maintains his integrity. He is undivided and therefore whole. “Away with you, Satan! For it is written (again, from Deuteronomy and Mosaic law), ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only (God).’”

And with that, we’re told the devil left, and the angels came. They came and waited on him. I love that! And Luke’s version adds that the devil departed “until an opportune time.” Because, you know, that’s how temptation works.

But Jesus knows who and whose he is. And so the temptations to listen to other voices, to pay heed to other gods, lesser gods, short-sighted, short cut gods, temporary, here-today, gone-tomorrow gods, hold no power for him. In this and so many other ways, Jesus give us a glimpse of what it looks like to live, not perfectly, but wholly (W-H-O-L-L-Y) grounded in the divine image. And therefore holy (H-O-L-Y).

It is *not* about perfection. It *is* about wholeness. Parker Palmer, one more time: “When we understand integrity for what it is, we stop obsessing over codes of conduct and embark on the more demanding journey toward being whole. Then we learn the truth of John Middleton Murry’s remark, ‘For the good (person) to realize that it is better to be whole than to be good is to enter on a straig(h)t and narrow path compared to which his (or her) previous rectitude was flowery license.’”

And wholeness comes to us when we are fully grounded in who we are, and whose we are—even in and through the very real brokenness of our lives and of the world. When we listen for and pay attention to the “still, small voice” within us, the voice of the divine, that speaks to our deepest needs and deepest longings.

Friends, we are broken people living in a broken world. But we are also beloved people living in a beautiful world—people made in the divine image, made by Love, for love. For wholeness.

May our journey with Jesus through the Lenten season be a reminder of both, always remembering who and whose we are. May it be so.