

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL

March 9, 2014

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell

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

Today's message is brought to you, in part, by the wonders of the Internet.

Every year, early in Lent, we have readings about TEMPTATION. Always about Jesus' temptation in the desert shortly after his baptism and before his ministry begins. This year we also have the story of temptation in the Garden of Eden. I have wondered how these play in 2014. Is temptation—or rather, resisting temptation—really relevant today? Or is temptation just a slightly naughty thing that just rates a wink or a nod when we succumb?

For help in answering my question, I went to Google. Of the first ten entries, numbers 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, and 10 related to Tyler Perry's movie, "Temptation: Confessions of a Marriage Counselor." The ratings were not that great. There were a couple of links to definitions of temptation. Then there were restaurants and resorts, music groups (of course), chocolate and toffee stores, and a pale ale aged in used chardonnay barrels from Sonoma County: "temptation in a glass." Just the thing we preachers would love at this time of year. Sipping pale ale, savoring chocolates, and lounging on the beach at an oceanside resort.

So, the question remains. Is the idea of temptation and resisting it out of fashion today? Is Lent, as a time of reflection, repentance, and return relevant to our lives? Not as in beating our chests, wearing hair shirts, or groveling in sin, but even as a time of reflection, refocusing and deepening our relationship with God and how we live as God's people?

The problem of temptation has been with us since the very beginnings of human existence. It shows up in our Judeo-Christian tradition today in this familiar story of Adam and Eve, a piece of fruit, a wily serpent, nakedness, and a wrathful God.

Before we delve into the question I have posed, I feel compelled to take a bit of a detour. On this weekend, it is still deemed necessary to observe International Women's Day to remind us that women the world over are still vulnerable to oppression, even to violence. And it is often perpetuated in the name of religion. Today's story from the Genesis is a prime offender. It has played such havoc through the centuries that the residue is still prevalent today, even if we are no longer aware of how it formed these lasting attitudes toward women.

Oh, it's not the story itself. The story is part of an ancient saga—a myth, with pieces borrowed from surrounding cultures that was passed down through the generations to try to answer some basic human questions. How did the world come into being? How did sin and evil come into a seemingly perfect creation? Why do we have to work so hard--and suffer pain? This is not history. Or science, but a beautiful picture of a perfect paradise created by a loving, caring God—and how to account for the reality and the human behavior the storytellers saw that was so different from this perfection.

No, it is not the story itself but what has been done to it—what has been embroidered onto it by its interpreters. Using it to cast woman in the role of seductress and even the source of all sin. Yes—this is true. You will even find traces of that in Paul's letters. And the early church Fathers ran with it. We find it in most of the famous art of the middle ages. But it's not in the reading we heard this morning. The word “sin” does not appear, nor does “original sin.” The notion of Eve as temptress comes later—from writings around the time of Jesus and Paul that did not make it into the official canon of the Bible.

[As Bible scholar Phyllis Tribble has noted, the first woman eats the fruit only after making a reasoned decision based on her conversation with the serpent: "God knows," the serpent tells Eve, "that as soon as you eat of it [the tree] your eyes will be opened and you will be like divine beings who know good and bad" (Genesis 3:5).⁽²⁾ After careful consideration of the serpent's words, Eve plucks the fruit from the tree and shares it with Adam, who has been present throughout her conversation with the serpent: "When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave some to her husband, and he ate" (Genesis 3:6). Although God has explicitly prohibited Adam from eating from the tree (Genesis 2:16-17), the first man does so freely, without question or comment. Eve does not need to convince him. (from “Did Eve Fall or Was She Pushed?” , Susan L. Greiner, Bible Review August, 1999)

There are alternate interpretations, of course that do not play man against woman. One is that this is a story of a loss of innocence, of gaining maturity, of having choices with the potential of becoming partners with God rather than remaining innocent and childlike--sort of like our teenage children and grandchildren going through some dumb and painful things in order to grow up into full people.

A related theme is that the sin in the story is not so much the disobedience Adam and Eve committed by eating of the only thing forbidden to them—the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The sin is in thinking that knowledge would make them like God. The temptation was one of “being God,” being “in control.”

Okay. This detour has taken way too long. But it does have a point. I promise. In the end, I’m suggesting that we look at this story of temptation of the first people not as a caricature that proves that one gender should be superior to the other (one as being innocently taken in by the devious other) but reflecting the very human nature that all of us exhibit—our desire to “play God,” to control our own worlds and lives for our own comfort and well-being. Like Adam and Eve, we say “yes” to food, knowledge, and security. The best things in life. We make ourselves the center instead of God—and that is the problem.

Jesus, in the wilderness, faced these same types of temptation: food, safety, and power. He went to the wilderness, a desolate and harsh place, right after his baptism and that powerful affirmation from God. He goes to prepare for his earthly ministry.

Unlike Adam and Eve who had their fill of good food, Jesus is famished from fasting after nearly forty days. He is alone, and maybe lonely—the perfect setup for temptation. The Evil One invites him to make bread from the stones—take care of that hunger. Think of the good you could do in feeding the hungry. But, Jesus says, “No.” Bread comes from the hand of God.

Well, how about safety, Jesus? If you have faith, the angels will catch you. Jesus says, “No.” God isn’t interested in being tested or tricks or foolish bravado. Ah, then, how about power. You can do such good. All you have to do is worship the Evil One. Again, Jesus says, :” No.” Power may be good and necessary for justice. But not at any price and certainly not for its own sake.

Jesus is unequivocal. He stands his ground. He retains his integrity and refuses to put himself at the center.

Every day we are tested. We are tested with bread. When we live *for* bread instead of *by* bread; when we worry about where our bread is buttered and take the safe path instead of the right path, we risk wrong choices.

Every day we are tested by the desire for safety. In our faith, when we are primarily concerned about securing our own lives instead of our faith freeing us to be for others; when our religious practice itself or the institutional religion substitutes for faith; when we are anxious that there is not enough security for ourselves and for our neighbor, we risk wrong choices.

Every day we are tested with power and with our use of power. When we focus on the errors of those who have more power than we and deny our own power and what we do with it, we risk wrong choices.

The most dangerous temptations of all can come in ambiguous circumstances—and our world is full of them. To those of us who consider ourselves as basically good, as just trying our best to live good lives for ourselves and our families, it is so easy to rationalize, to confuse a good end with questionable means, or to be indifferent or apathetic, self-concerned at the expense of a neighbor. As William Willimon says, “We are sometimes at our worst when we are trying to do our best.”

So, back to the basic questions: whether being concerned about temptation is “out of fashion;” whether Lent is irrelevant as a time of reflection, repentance, and return.

Lent is NOT irrelevant if we believe that our church, our practice of faith shapes us as believers, and prepares us to make good choices.

Lent is NOT irrelevant if we believe our rites and rituals carry a sense of holiness and help us to turn and return to God as the center of life.

The wilderness is not just desolate and lonely. It is, to be sure, a place of testing but also a place of preparation and a place with the potential for lush growth—the breathtaking blooming of the desert when the rains come.

Jesus showed us three tools for enduring and coming out of the wilderness: 1) prayer, 2) fasting, and 3) faith in the Word of God. With these three tools, we can live our faith,

live our baptismal promises and our love of God and neighbor. So, I invite you to a Holy Lent:

A Lent of prayer: listening for God, conversing with God. A Lent of fasting: not just from excesses of food and drink but from those things with which you have replaced God in your life. And a Lent of faith: remembering that God is with us, we do not need to be in control. God can be God, and we can be God's beloved people. And that is Good News!

Amen

2 Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 40:1 (1973), p. 40.