

Faith Mennonite Church
February 10, 2008 ~ First Sunday of Lent

Into the Wilderness: No bypasses or shortcuts
Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

On Wednesday evening a small group of us gathered here on this platform for an Ash Wednesday service. On the first day of Lent we were reminded that we are all made of dust, that we need times like the 40 days of Lent to recognize our frailties and our failings and to turn to Jesus, who faced the same questions, doubts and temptations that we do.

Honestly facing our human condition is an age-old task. The Genesis account from the Garden of Eden that we read this morning represents an ancient community's attempt to explain the existence of good and evil in the world. Several things stand out: First, what God created was good. The first two chapters of Genesis depict a God who creates order from chaos, and places plants, animals, and humans in a setting of sustainability and goodness. God places God's own life-giving breath in the humans and communicates directly with them.

But one thing is withheld – the knowledge of good and evil, or wisdom. But God does not withhold it entirely; God places it within grasp of the humans but asks them to abstain, for this knowledge will ultimately bring death. God places it, not as a temptation, but as a test, knowing that the ability to choose is what makes people human.

Enter the serpent, described as craftier than any other wild animal. The serpent shows up in this place of abundance and goodness and poses a question that begins to cause doubt for the man and woman. The serpent suggests another paradigm – rather than dying, the humans will become divine if they obtain the knowledge of good and evil. If God has this capacity, they should too. It seems to make sense: the fruit looks good, wisdom seems like a good thing – let's try it. Many of us can relate to this very well and remember times in our own lives, or in the process of raising children, when it seemed the only way we could learn was the hard way—through hands-on, personal experience. The advice of parents or wise elders wasn't a match for our belief that we could succeed where others had failed.

The serpent was right on one account – the humans did not immediately die. But it was dead wrong on another: rather than becoming divine, the first man and woman became more human – fully human—with the capacity not just to know of good and evil, but also to practice and bear the consequences of both. This created distance in their relationship with God and a self-awareness that hadn't been present previously. And as subsequent history unfolded we know that humans have exercised their capacity to choose evil as often as they have chosen the good.

The testing that Jesus faced contains similarities and important differences to that of the humans in the Genesis account. Like the first humans who were in direct communication with God in the Garden of Eden, Jesus had just heard God's voice at his baptism declaring him God's son, the Beloved, with whom God was well pleased." But Jesus' experience bears a greater

resemblance to the experience of the children of Israel in the wilderness. All three synoptic gospel writers, Matthew, Mark and Luke, frame Jesus' temptation scene within a period of 40 days and 40 nights, reminding us of the 40 years that Israel roamed in the wilderness. Unlike the man and woman, who were well-fed and had every pleasure at their disposal, Jesus went to a place of deprivation and isolation.

And perhaps this is one key to the different outcomes. Surrounded by goodness and plenty, and no practice in decision-making, the first man and woman were quickly convinced by the deceiver that they could take action without consulting again with God. It seems it would have been a small matter to simply put the serpent on hold, bring God into the conversation and clarify again God's original request and the reasoning behind it. But they took the serpent's interpretation at face value.

The tempter came at Jesus with the same techniques the serpent used with the first humans – using God's words to undermine God and God's authority. In both cases, and like that of the children of Israel in the wilderness, the question at hand is a matter of identity. Will the first man and woman, will the children of Israel, will Jesus accept their proper relationship with God—live as fully human in communion with God—or will they try to be like God, denying their human frailties and going it on their own?

In the case of Jesus the questions are poignant. The tempter taunts him, “*If you are the Son of God...*” The object here is not to lure Jesus into one sin or another (this is not about avarice or vice), but to question who he was and how he would carry out his ministry. The tempter laid perfectly good things before Jesus, served up in the words of tradition and scripture. But they represented a type of messiahship—what one scholar dubs “bread, circus, and political power” (Boring)—that characterized the ways of the Roman Empire instead of the way of the cross.

Jesus' responses are all words of scripture from the book of Deuteronomy, words that were part of the covenant relationship that God desired with the children of Israel. Jesus' answer in resisting temptation does not set him apart from us because he was divine. Rather, because he was human, it sets an example that it is possible to follow the way that God intends for God's beloved children.

The gospel account of Jesus' testing was intended to help the church think not just of Jesus' identity but also its own identity. How did Jesus live out his calling as the Son of God? How do we live out our calling as those who follow the Son and are sons and daughters of God?

Jesus' example teaches us that “to be a ‘child of God’ means to have a trusting relationship with God that does not ask for miraculous exceptions to the limitations of an authentic human life” (Boling). Living in a virtual Garden of Eden as we do in North America, surrounded by abundance, coupled with constant messages that fulfillment comes through more food, more drink, bigger homes and sportier cars, we are tempted to forget that our identity and our deepest hunger is not met by the comfort of materials goods, but through a trusting relationship with God. And we find our deepest satisfaction not in the accumulation of possessions but by sharing with and living for others.

And in a high-tech world, where science and technology have solved many problems and improved our lives in many ways—even as the industrial and military economy threatens our long-term survival—we may be tempted to believe that alleviating pain and suffering are the highest goals no matter what the cost. But the world’s way of alleviating pain often does so for a few at the cost of the many. Take our healthcare system that will provide excessively expensive procedures for those who are insured, but often denies primary care to the uninsured poor. Or the current war this country fights in Iraq, which according to our leaders will preserve our freedom and keep terrorists from attacking us on our own soil, even as it has unleashed untold suffering and millions of refugees among the Iraqi population. Jesus came to alleviate pain and suffering, not by miraculously eliminating it or by transferring it to others, but by absorbing it, taking the pain and suffering of others upon himself, even to the point of dying on the cross.

On this first Sunday of Lent in 2008, God’s call comes to us, as it has come to all people at all times: to embrace our humanity by accepting our humanity—not trying to be God or test God, but to accept the trials and testing that come our way as opportunities to trust more completely in God and to recommit ourselves to walking in the path modeled by Jesus.

As you entered this morning you were offered a stone. I invite you to let this stone represent a situation or an aspect in your current life that is a test of your identity as a child of God, or that stands as an obstacle in trusting God to provide for your deepest needs. After a brief time of reflection, all are invited to come, during the next song, and place your stone on the table, at the foot of the cross, as a commitment to journey with Jesus into the wilderness this Lenten season.

Joetta Schlabach

Boring, M. Eugene. *New Interpreter's Bible Vol VIII: Matthew*, “Introduction, commentary and Reflections.” Abingdon Press 1995.