

Faith Mennonite Church
March 13, 2011
Lent 1: Becoming Human: Shaped by Testing
Joetta Schlabach

Things to remember when we're tested
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

This week is the beginning of Lent, these 40 days before Easter when the church relives the spiritual experience of being in the wilderness. In doing so, we recall the story of Noah's ark that rested on Mount Ararat for 40 days as the flood waters receded. We recall the 40 years of the wilderness wandering by the children of Israel after they were freed from Egypt. We recall Moses' 40 days on Mount Sinai awaiting the Ten Commandments. And we recall the 40 days of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness.

Each of these stories, and the story of Adam and Eve that we read today, as well as the stories of individual encounters with Jesus that we will reflect on in worship the next six weeks, are stories of formation. They are stories of becoming human, of being called and shaped by God and Jesus.

Today's stories of temptation, from Genesis and Matthew, are stories of identity and vocation. The two are very much interwoven. Our understanding of *who—and whose*—we are shapes the way we live in the world. Our understanding of *what we're called to do* shapes how we view ourselves. Being fully human, then, is bringing our identity and our vocation into alignment.

The Genesis story that we read today launches directly into the vocational question: God placed the first humans in a garden with a task: to till (serve) and keep (preserve) the garden. Some people have read the creation accounts in Genesis as if humans were the pinnacle of creation. But here we find that their calling is to serve and preserve God's garden, not be the center of attention.

The identity question precedes the verses we read. While not the pinnacle or center of creation, humans, both male and female, were created *in the image of God* and pronounced "good." God affirmed their goodness by coming to them each evening in conversation. It would seem that both their identity and their calling (vocation) were clear.

Trouble entered this story as Adam and Eve became distracted by a voice other than that of God. In a rather brief conversation with a crafty creature, another part of creation, they began to question both their identity and their vocation. The serpent tried to offer them a changed identity: they could become *more* "like God." All of a sudden they were not *enough—they needed more*. And the serpent tried to remake their vocational call, offering that they could be masters ("you shall not die"; "you don't need to follow the rules") rather than servants. Distracted, they listened to this voice and took the bait, only to realize that God alone can create things in the likeness of God; God alone determines the call and destiny of the created order. What God has made and called good cannot be made better. Adam and Eve's attempt to get more, be better and be in control resulted in losing the best and feeling shame.

The story of Jesus' temptation directly follows the account of his baptism. The baptism was a time of sealing Jesus' identity and launching his vocational ministry. Matthew says that as Jesus came up from the waters of baptism he heard a confirming voice: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Those words held an echo of the divine words spoken at creation: this one is *good*. Like Adam and Eve, Jesus was called to serve God as fully human and he embraced that call. Unlike Adam and Eve, Jesus did not lose his attention as he spent time in the wilderness clarifying his vocation. The tempter tried to question Jesus' identity: *if you are the Son of God*. And the tempter tried a Ponzi scheme, offering Jesus goods that were not his to give: "You can bedazzle by feeding the crowds (turning stone to bread), being a wonder-worker (throwing himself from a high place), and siding up with the rich and powerful (bowing to false images of power)!"

With each new test, Jesus retorted with words from Moses (in the book of Deuteronomy, the tradition that had formed him), affirming that his goodness was in right relationship *with* God, not trying *to be* God. He affirmed that his calling was to serve God's plan, which was one of emptying himself in love, not amassing power, wealth and control.

The Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians contains a hymn that beautifully captures this truth:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8)

Like Adam, Eve, and Jesus, we too are given an identity and a vocation at our birth and at our rebirth when we enter the waters of baptism. At our birth we are made human, male and female, good and beloved by God. When we receive the waters of baptism, acknowledging that we have also inherited the brokenness of the sin of Adam and Eve, we receive God's grace to follow the way of Jesus, to answer the call to till and care for God's garden—this earth and its creatures. Some of us do it in a literal way, nurturing soil, planting seeds, sharing the harvest, and caring for animals. Many of us do it in other ways: nurturing people, planting seeds of hope, courage, and wisdom, teaching others, binding up the wounded, engineering systems and creating and implementing policies that enhance the common good.

When we claim our identity as beloved children of God and commit ourselves to the vocation of caring for and preserving life, we become fully human. The grace of God that abounds through Jesus Christ (Romans 5:15) empowers us to resist distraction and temptation by the messages that say we are not good enough or do not have enough. If we listen for God's voice we will hear the assurance of sufficiency. We need not be distracted by the feelings of compulsion or guilt that suggest we are masters, responsible to right all injustice and solve every dilemma. We are servants. If we follow God's call to care and preserve we will do the work that is before us today and recognize our human limitations.

The tradition of giving something up in Lent is intended to heighten and focus our intimate attention to the voice of Jesus, so that as we face challenges and distraction, we will be quick to remember these two things: our identity (we are beloved of God, redeemed through Jesus) and our vocation (called to be God's servants). May the spirit of Christ empower us to accept and live into these gifts of God. By God's grace, may we follow Jesus in the way of being fully human.