

March 1, 2020
First Sunday of Lent
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
Matthew 4:1-11

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“Temptation and Testing with the Spirit in the Wilderness”

Good morning, friends. We begin our Lenten journey this morning with two stories of temptation and testing. As with so many stories in the Bible these require of us a certain level of humility, charity and patience.¹ You know, in many cases, it is better to read the Bible like one might read poetry – slowly, with patience, and an open heart. Moreover, when we read and reflect on the Bible together, it is always important to ask: *what* and *where* is the Word speaking to us in and through these stories? *What and where* is the Word speaking to us, to you, to me, this day? We will no doubt hear and encounter this Word in a multitude of ways, depending on our experiences and our circumstances. For while we share in this experience of life together, our experiences are wonderfully, and at times painfully, diverse – and this is, no doubt, part of the beauty and the mystery of human life.

It is easy to read a familiar story like the one about the garden and the serpent without patience. We have heard it so many times before, it is as if we already know the meaning of the story in advance of its telling. And it is for this reason that it is important for us to be reminded, periodically, that the Word of God is not something that has a fixed, singular meaning for all times and places; rather, the Word of God is *living, dynamic, always creative, personal, concrete, and contextual*. And the Word of God always involves *us* in all of our particularity, encountering us in the midst of our daily lives, inviting and welcoming us to open our hearts, so that we may hear the Word in a fresh new way, so that we may experience the Gospel anew. As the author of Lamentations observes, God’s steadfast love and mercy are new every morning (3:22-23).

The story of the garden has been used and abused in a variety of ways, distorting a faithful hearing. There is what we might call “the woman is to blame” interpretation, according to which Eve is “the weaker sex,” susceptible not only to the temptations of the snake, but a temptress herself as she leads her innocent, God-fearing husband astray from the straight and narrow path. As we know, this interpretation has been tremendously destructive, used to justify a long history of violence and abuse against women. If we read this text with more patience and care we see that it depicts male and female as deeply connected to each other – “bone from bone” and “flesh from flesh,” as Gen 2:23 has it – equally responsible, equally experiencing judgment, guilt, shame, redemption, and grace.²

There are other abuses of this text, of course, perhaps most popular of all, is the use of this text to justify what dogmatic theologians have called “original sin” – especially the idea of a transition, or a “fall” from an original state of perfection to a state of sin and depravity. But the text is more rich, more subtle, more complex than these interpretations allow. Through metaphor and myth the story conveys the complexity, the frailty, and the paradoxical character of human life. We are free, yet often so bound by selfish desire; we have the capacity to do great good, yet we inflict harm on one another

¹ Ellen F. Davis, “The Soil That is Scripture,” in *Engaging Biblical Authority: Perspectives on the Bible as Scripture*, ed. William P. Brown (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007) 36-44.

² For this interpretation see Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986).

and on creation. We feel at times so connected to God, creation, and one another, and at other times so incredibly distant, so alienated, so broken. At times we feel great confidence in who we are, optimism about who we may be becoming; at other times we feel deeply ashamed of ourselves and our bodies. At times our knowledge leads to wisdom and to life; at other times our knowledge leads to destruction and death. At times we are tempted and tested, and in the midst of it all, we do not always choose life. And yet, God remains faithfully present to us in love, God remains in relationship with us, merciful, caring, full of grace. Indeed, if we were to read on in this story, we would see a powerful symbol of God's provision, as the story portrays God as One who lovingly and mercifully sows garments for Adam and Eve, clothing them, caring for them, and caring for us in all of our fragility and precariousness, even in our feelings of guilt and shame.

We read about another story of temptation and testing in our Gospel reading. Immediately following his baptism, Jesus is led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted (or tested, the Greek text can mean both) by the devil. Jesus fasts for forty days and forty nights, we are told. In placing Jesus in the wilderness for forty days, Matthew is here again drawing a connection with several stories in the Hebrew scriptures. Noah and his family were on board the ark during the great flood for forty days and forty nights, after which God made a covenant to never again destroy the earth with a flood (Gen 7:4, 12; 8:6; 9:8-17). Moses fasted on Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights (Exod 24:18; 34:27-28; Deut 9:9). Elijah fasted in the desert before he received a commission from God (1 Kgs 19:8). The people of Israel wandered in the wilderness for *forty years* as they awaited their arrival in the Promised Land (Exod 16:35; Deut 2:7). And, of course, the season of Lent lasts forty days, during which time we are invited to self-examination and self-reflection as we follow Jesus toward the cross.

It is the Spirit that leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted and tested and in this story Jesus is faced with temptations involving food, trust in God, and power. These temptations are specific to his ministry and the path of his life. We do not necessarily face the same temptations and tests that Jesus faced, nor are we called to be tempted and tested in these ways. We are tempted and tested in our own ways, unique to our experiences and to the various circumstances of our lives.

This morning some of us are being tested by the experience of tremendous loss and separation – the death of a loved one, a father, a sister, a dear friend. Some of us are being tested by the experience of our own physical frailty – the fragility of our bones, our flesh, our minds, our bodies; some of us are being tested by financial insecurity and fear of the future; some of us are being tested by the harassment of ICE agents and a violent immigration system; some of us are being tested by a spirit of despair, discouragement, and fear; some of us are being tested by a period of transition and change and an unknown future; some of us are being tested by our parents, while some of us are being tested by our children. Some of us are being tested by a lack of purpose and meaning and by the exhaustion that can often accompany daily life. Lent is a time to reflect on the ways that we are *being tested* in our lives; and to ask *where is the Spirit of God in the midst of turmoil, where is God's healing at work in our lives?* Where are *you* being tested today? Take a moment to reflect on this. Where is the Spirit at work in the trials that you face in your life? And where is God's grace and mercy present? Where is God speaking, moving, and leading you in the midst of it all? Just as the Spirit was present with Jesus in his testing in the wilderness and clothing Adam and Eve in their shame and guilt in the garden, the Spirit is personally present to us, to each and every one of you, in the particularity of your lives and in the midst of testing. The Spirit is present in the midst of our experiences of the wilderness, making provisions for us, clothing us, caring for us, sustaining us. Amen.