

The Tempted

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, the period of time where we prepare ourselves to remember Jesus' death and celebrate his resurrection. During Lent, we confront the rawness of humanity. We confront our mortality and our sin. And yet ultimately, Lent is a hopeful time. Naming ourselves as fully mortal, as sinful, as wonderful but limited, as fully human is actually good news because it acknowledges that our dependence is not on ourselves but on God.

We will all die. We will all mess up. And that's ok because God has overcome death. God has overcome sin. And so shall we, but only by confronting it. So Lent is a time for us to look directly at our humanity – all of it, the good and the bad. Therefore, during these next weeks, our sermons will focus on different themes that are both very Lenten and also very human. Today we begin with acknowledging that all of us are tempted.

Many images come to mind when we think of temptation. We often think of things like lust, greed, gluttony, and so on. However, today I want to invite us to think of temptation not so much as the desire to do specific acts that we know we shouldn't do but rather to think of the root of all temptation being the fear of lack, of not having enough, of not being enough, of our world not being enough, and maybe even of God not being enough. All temptation tries to convince us that we have to be something more, that we have to have something more, that God needs to be something more, or that the world around us needs to be something more for us to be happy and whole. We see this played out in the story of the serpent tempting Eve and Adam.

In the first chapter of Scripture, we are told that God created humankind in God's own image. We are the pinnacle of creation, the best thing that God made. And yet, over and over again, we humans believe we are not good enough, not smart enough, not talented enough, not pretty enough, not enough. In the story of the serpent, we read that after first asking Eve to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, she says no. But the serpent goes on, "if you eat this tree, you will be like God." Being human is not enough the snake tells her.

It's one of Satan's great lies. The snake tells us, "You have to be more than human. You have to be like God." This message is reinforced time and again to us in our society. If we could only be more...if we could only be smarter...if we could only be prettier...if we could only be a better parent...and so on. The implication is that who we are is not enough and if we were just more, then we could be happy, we could be whole, we could be alright.

This temptation tells us that we have to be more than we are to be enough. But what we notice is that if our self worth is based on what we have achieved, then the yard stick that measures enough seems to keep moving further and further in the distance. My wife, Mary Page, wrote an article a few years ago about Robin Williams' suicide, and she shared these words:

“We naively think, ‘How could someone loved by so many want to die or numb out to the point of death?’ I thought this today. And I thought about the times in my own struggle that I have just *known* that if I did something important, if I were recognized for something wonderful that touched thousands of lives, I would be happy. I would finally be happy. But then these deaths betray the utter fallacy of that logic.”

The tragic death of Robin Williams, and of countless others, reveal to us the lie behind the snake’s temptation. We can never do something great enough to believe that we are enough because our identity is not something we earn. Rather, it is simply God’s gift to us. We are lovable, we are enough just because God made us, and no act of greatness can ever make us anything more than we already are. We don’t have to be like God. Being human is enough.

But what happens when God is not enough? The snake began his temptation with a lie about God – “did God say you shall not eat of any tree in the garden.” God had planted a beautiful garden, given Adam and Eve everything they needed and more, saying, “Eat of any and every tree save one.” But the snake took the one forbidden tree and turned it into a rule forbidding them from eating of every tree – God has not provided for you he tells them.

God offered Adam and Eve a relationship, a friendship. But the snake made God out to be nothing more than a rule giver – don’t eat of the trees. Time and again, we (and by “we,” I especially mean religious people) reduce God to a set of do’s and don’ts. In the garden, Adam and Eve enjoyed intimate communion with God. But rather than focusing on the relationship, the snake tempted them to focus on the rule...and a distorted one at that. When we speak of God, we are speaking of something both much larger and much more intimate than any commandment or law. God is different than the 10 commandments or even the Bible itself. God is both bigger than we could ever fathom and more intimate than we can understand. Yes, God did tell Adam and Eve to not eat of one tree. But God was far more than that. God provided every other tree for them for food. God planted a beautiful garden for them to live in. God related to them in deep and intimate ways. In short, God was more than enough for Adam and Eve.

But please know that there may indeed be times when it feels that God is not enough. Jesus, himself, cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” The Psalmists often would take their complaints to God. The entire book of Job is about Job’s insistence that God had not treated him fairly. In each of these cases, neither Job, the Psalmists, nor Jesus are condemned for questioning God, but that type of questioning can only happen in the context of relationship. The snake tries to make Adam and Eve (and us) think of God only in terms of rule when God, time and again, seeks relationship.

Finally, the snake wants Adam and Eve to think the garden is not enough. It’s not enough to have every tree, except one, you need that one too. And we are tempted in the same way aren’t we? If we could only have a bigger house or a fancier car or live in a different neighborhood or make more money. It is so easy to look at what someone else has and think

that we don't have enough. In fact, desiring more can become an obsession, whose pursuit can never satisfy us. Because once we get more, we think we need more still, and so it goes.

Of course the three temptations – you are not enough, God is not enough, the world is not enough are all related. If we believe God is more of a rule giver than relational, we believe that we and others are judged on our ability to keep the rules. When we fail then we believe we are not enough. When we believe we are not enough, we try to build ourselves up by pointing out how others are worse than us or by trying to accumulate more and more of the things the surrounding culture tells us will make us ok. And just as it was for Adam and Eve, all of these temptations are lies. We hear metaphorical snakes speaking to us all the time – lying to us – telling us that God is about rules and not relationships, telling us that we need to be more than what we are and the way to do that is to take more of the world around us.

So friends, this Lent, may we name these temptations for what they are – lies that promise to give us life but end up only sapping the life from us. May we resist these temptations – not because God will punish us if we don't – but because true abundant life is found in knowing that God is enough, that our world is enough, that we are enough.