

“The Battle of Temptation”

Lent 1A – March 13, 2011

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32;

Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

Introduction:

There are some great battles in history:

Waterloo, Stalingrad, D-Day, Gettysburg, Belleau Wood, Guadalcanal, Hue City, Fallujah, and many, many more.

However, one of the greatest ongoing battles humans have been fighting is the Battle of Temptation.

Our lessons from Genesis and Matthew deal with the issue of Temptation. You know what Temptations are, don't you? That's right, they were a black, male, Rhythm and Blues, Soul, Doo-Wap, singing groups from the '60's, '70's, and '80's who sang for MoTown Records – Bada Bing.

What? I've got the wrong temptations? Oh, oh, you mean the temptations that are desires or cravings for something usually wrong or bad for us; or something that incites us to desire to do something that is wrong; or someone, or something that tempts us. My bad, I had the wrong temptations in mind.

Indeed temptation is revealed in today's lessons as coming from one who is the original source of disobedience to God; that serpent from the Garden of

Eden, the very Devil himself. Since our fall in the Garden, facing temptations has become such a part of the human condition that even Jesus had to face them in order to demonstrate his full humanity. So,

Did God Create Temptations In Order To Make Us Fail?

I realize that the first three chapters of Genesis are not meant to be exact science and history. They are telling a story about God and us, and our relationship with one another. Yet, there is both scientific and historical insight in these first chapters.

The second chapter of Genesis focuses on the intimate connection humans have with our Creator, and why that intimacy was fractured. The chapter introduces us to humans, created by God, enjoying an intimate relationship with God; yet are innocent and naive, vulnerable to one who tells lies.

I think it is safe to say that Adam and Eve had never experienced lies before. God had never lied to them, and apparently they had never lied to each other. Then along comes another creature, in the form of a serpent, the Devil; and he lies to Eve. In fact, in John 8:44, Jesus says the Devil is the father of lies. Once the Devil, who was formerly the Archangel Lucifer, convinced

himself he could do a better job than God of running creation he became a liar. And,

Through the Devil's Lies Sin Enters The Human Condition.

Our Genesis lessons contain the conversation between the serpent and Eve that results in the first human disobedience to God - that is, sin. In 2:17, God instructed Adam and Eve, "*you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.*"

In 3:1, the serpent said to Eve, "*Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"* That was a deception. It was not what God said, and Eve knew it; but when she answers the Devil she doesn't exactly repeat what God said: "*We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die'.*" Maybe the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was in the middle of the garden? Maybe that wasn't a lie but a description of where the tree was rather than a description of the tree itself; but she did add to what God said by saying "*and you must not touch it, or you will die*". God didn't say that. She made it sound like just touching the tree would kill

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her; that's not what God said. So, already, in one question and one response the truth has been bent. Sin is starting to creep in.

Next the Devil responded to Eve in 3:4, with a complete lie, "*You will not certainly die*". The serpent knew that touching the tree was not going to kill Eve, so his lie, connected to her lie, makes for a plausible sounding deception. But a deception it was, and to it he added the temptation wrapped in more deception and lies: "*For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.*" His answer makes it sound like God was trying to prevent Eve from experiencing something good – 'having her eyes opened', 'being like God', 'knowing good and evil'.

It would be like a parent coming home with a French silk cream pie, and telling the children, "you can't eat any of this; you are not old enough to appreciate it." The probable truth is, "I don't want to share this with anyone. I want it all to myself". God doesn't deal in partial truth covered with deception. Jesus said, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life*". God's ways are complete honesty.

One of the big lies the devil told Eve was that she could be like God "knowing", that is experiencing

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good and evil. The fact is, God doesn't experience evil. God witnesses the effects of evil in others, but God doesn't do evil. God doesn't know evil in a first hand manner. The fact that Eve could have known God face-to-face and not realized His character troubles me. Otherwise, why would she not have seen through the devil's deception.

Somehow 'being like God' appealed to her ego more than the lie turned her away. So, she took the fruit and ate it. 3:6, describes the fruit as *"good for food, pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom."* What a lethal combination: food for the belly, pleasure to the eye, wisdom for the brain – enough justification for disobeying God. She was now motivated to sin by the prospect of gaining wisdom and being like God. Through lies and deceptions the Devil won. Humans now acted like him by disobeying God.

One of the great truths is, sinning leads to stupid actions – results that are temporal and short-lived, and injurious to someone: in this case loss of intimate relationship with God. Verse six says that Adam was there with Eve. He presumably saw and heard everything that took place between her and the Devil. He, too, knew God's command not to eat of that tree; yet, maybe to

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please his wife, maybe out of carelessness or stupidity; maybe out of curiosity (after all, Eve ate and didn't drop dead), Adam took the fruit from Eve, and ate it. Devil-plus two, God-minus two.

Sin has long-term effects, and also short-term consequences. Sin always alters us and changes our relationships. Verse 7, says that Adam and Eve's eyes were opened and "*they realized they were naked*". Why do you suppose "nakedness" was an issue? Were they not naked before they ate the fruit? Of course they were, yet something had changed within them. They had already lost an innate innocence about their bodies and their relationship. Now they were aware of nakedness and the differences of their bodies. They experienced carnal knowledge, shame, guilt, knowledge of good and evil, and they instinctively needed something to hide behind; so they made clothes to hide their bodies.

Did sexual relations begin after the loss of innocence and the awareness of nakedness? It seems like it. Sex is one of those "knowledge of good and evil" things, isn't it? On-the-one-hand, God designed sex to be good. The Prayer Book's marriage ceremony says that "*the union of husband and wife in heart, body, and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy;....*"

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On-the-other hand, how many evil activities are directly related to sex? Sex is used to exploit; it is used for prostitution. There is rape, abuse, incest, disease, and control all connected to sex. In western society, there is an excessive use of sexual liberty to “fulfill oneself”, to sell products, to make money, and to exploit women.” In any culture the utter domination of women has been driven by the sexual need of men to control, possess and dominate. God’s way was intended to be a mutual enjoying of each other without embarrassment or shame, all in the total presence of God.

The Genesis story teaches us a lot about the subtleness of temptation, about the cunningness of the one behind it as he patiently works to find a weakness within us; and of temptation’s power to lead us to sin and sin’s consequence of broken relationships.

Adam, as the first human, failed the test to maintain his relationship with God at all cost. It’s a test we’ve been failing ever since. I know I have failed it – more than once. In our Gospel lesson we witness the triumph of a human standing up to, and conquering the Devil’s temptation. Our lesson in Romans teaches us that Jesus accomplishes what Adam failed to do, and in his sacrifice undoes the eternal death penalty brought by sin.

It Is How Jesus Dealt With Temptation.

After his baptism, Jesus was driven by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. There he fasted for 40 days, and at that low point of extreme hunger and physical weakness, the Devil came to him. The temptations reveal how powerful Jesus was in his spiritual life that he could maintain his commitment to Godly living even when his body was at such a low point. When I get too stressed out, all my human weaknesses are manifested. If I also am weak spiritually I become fodder for the devil's temptations. Do you know your weak points, and the need to keep strong spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and – as much as possible – physically? The devil is always looking for a weakness, an opening, to come to us and tempt us to sin.

The Devil figured, after 40 days of fasting, that Jesus was vulnerable to temptation. After about 30 days of fasting the body is so devoid of food that it begins to cannibalize itself to keep essential nutrition going to the brain and other vital organs. That was the state of Jesus when the devil came to him – near death.

Three times Satan tempted Jesus to turn his back on God and take care of things himself. The first temptation: *“If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to*

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become bread”, was a direct appeal for Jesus to use his position as the Son of God to feed himself and to become a Messiah who would focus on meeting material needs. The temptation was not really a question from the devil. In the Greek, it is a first class conditional sentence, “if you are the Son of God; and I know that you are.” The devil pulled out all stops to get Jesus out of focus about his mission to reconcile us back to God our Father. “Jesus, you have the power – use it! Don’t be hungry, that’s stupid. Turn these stones into bread.” Become a bread messiah.

The second temptation was to make Jesus a wonder-worker who defies the very laws of nature. He took him to the pinnacle of the Temple, maybe as much as 400 feet above the valley floor below. “Jesus, jump off! You know God has given *his angels charge over you, in their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone*” (Ps. 91:11-12). Be a wonder worker Jesus. People will follow you anywhere just on the chance you do a wonderful thing for them – “Blessed are they who hang around Jesus and receive a miracle from him”. In fact, Jesus’ ministry was one of miracles testifying to the truth He was teaching about the Kingdom of God; but they were accomplished through the Holy

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Spirit, not Jesus taking matters into His own hands. Is it any small wonder that Jesus constantly turned people's attention to His Heavenly Father?

The third temptation was to get Jesus to take the easy, painless, broad highway to becoming the Lord of the Earth. The devil took him to a high mountain and showed him the kingdoms of this world. "*Bow down, Jesus, and worship me and I will give you all these kingdoms. You don't have to go to the cross to become the Lord. Why suffer and die, when I will just give them to you. Isn't that kinder than what God has in store for you?*"

Fortunately for us, Jesus knew that he couldn't defeat evil by compromising with it; that our salvation depended on his faithfulness even to the point of death on a cross. Hallelujah, praise Jesus!

So, how do you battle temptation? Jesus battled it by keeping himself filled with God's Spirit, fed on God's Word, nurtured by quality time alone with his Heavenly Father, and impassioned by a constant love for God's people. Jesus is the pioneer of our faith. He has shown us a way to face and overcome temptation, but it requires a complete devotion to God and Godly living. This Lent, we can draw closer to God than we have ever before been. The choice always is ours.