

First Sunday of Lent  
February 10, 2008

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*Scriptures: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11*

All during the season of Lent our Gospel readings will be about various people who have encounters with Jesus. I don't know what was the logic of the folks who put the lectionary together, but this year I want to focus on what those encounters can teach us, specifically what aspect of Christian life is lifted up for us in each of those encounters.

Today's text, the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, is the traditional text for the first Sunday in Lent. And I believe that the aspect of Christian life that is lifted up is obedience. (And okay, I didn't just figure it out by myself, the second lesson was a pretty big hint.)

Now, I would bet that there are a lot of Lutheran preachers who are not entirely comfortable preaching sermons on obedience. We're Lutheran and we are much more comfortable preaching on grace and forgiveness. But a quote from B. Clayton Bell, in an article entitled "Many Happy Returns" sums it up pretty well. He said, "There are two big lies that Satan has been perpetrating ever since the Garden of Eden. The first is that God is mean, vindictive, a spoilsport whose main role in life is to keep us from being fulfilled and happy--when we step out of bounds, he takes delight in making us pay.

The second lie is that God really doesn't care what we do--probably doesn't know. And if he does, his business is to forgive us. He'll always forgive no matter what, so it really doesn't make much difference how we live and what we believe." (B. Clayton Bell, "Many Happy Returns," Preaching Today, Tape No. 135.) That tells me that obedience matters – a lot. So here goes.

It's interesting to me, that when you take a closer look you see that the text says that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. That tells me that temptation is just a fact of life. It is part of what it means to be alive. Nobody gets off without being tempted. Not even Jesus. (And being isolated, on your own, away from your normal routines and support systems tends to make it worse.)

You see, the world is full of temptation. The world is full of choices, options. Even from the beginning in the Garden of Eden where we were created with free will, the ability to think, evaluate, and act. And all those choices have consequences. God said to Adam, in the day that you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and bad, you shall die. That's a pretty big consequence.

In all the choices we have to make just to live life day to day, there are consequences. Some consequences will be good, some not so good. Some choices will have consequences that are good for us, but not so good for others. Some will be good for others, but not so good for us. Some will seem to be good for us now, but are, in reality, are not so good for us in the long run. You get the idea.

In fact, one way to interpret Genesis 3, and that famous apple from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, is that it is the knowledge of good and bad, pleasant and

unpleasant, desirable and undesirable. And with it humans came to be aware of the good and not so good in life. With knowledge we began to desire the good, (and more and more of it, I think we call that greed these days.) And we began to attempt to avoid the not-so-good. We began to know fear, fear that we would experience not-so-good in our life. It may not have been the same as dying, but human life has never been the same.

Now human life is a continuous stream of making choices, knowing that there are good and not-so-good consequence to all the choices we make. Temptation is characterized as one of those good for us, not so good later/for others combos. It is so basic, so integral to life it is as if one could say to be human is to be tempted. What those temptations are vary from person to person, they are shaped by our life experiences and circumstances. But no one gets off the hook. Not even Jesus.

I don't want to spend a great deal of time on this, but it seems to me that the trickiest temptations for us are each a variation of the temptation that Jesus faced. When he was famished he was faced the temptation of turning the stones into bread. We aren't famished, but we often face the temptation of thinking in terms of scarcity, that there isn't enough, that God won't provide, so we need to be careful with sharing the bread and resources we have.

Jesus faced the temptation to make a name for himself by some creating a spectacle. We face the temptation of thinking that we don't matter, that we aren't important unless we have a big name, a big reputation. We forget that every one of us is beloved by God, and in God's eyes we are all important.

And we face what is perhaps the trickiest temptation of all, the temptation to buy the lie that in the face of the not-so-good stuff happening in the world around us – we are powerless, the lie that there is nothing we can do to change the things that seem so much bigger than us. We may not be able to do everything, but that is in no way the same thing as able to do nothing.

Just as no one gets off the hook of being tempted, no one except Jesus completely resists temptation either. We all fall short. We sin. We miss the mark of living out what God desires of us. We end up hurting ourselves or others, and usually both. By what we do, and what we fail to do. Usually both. Which brings me to the part about obedience.

Resisting temptation is easier if we have an external force helping us. Take food and eating for example. Weight Watchers works because people have the help of their weekly weigh-in to help them resist the temptation overeating. Lots of people never were able to find the strength to quit smoking until they had doctor's orders to do so. Jesus turned to the Word of God to help him resist the tempter's offers.

The Word of God is the most powerful force in the life of the believer, because it shows us what God desires. God spelled it out for us in the Ten Commandments. God spelled it out for us in the words of the prophets. And finally, God spelled it out for us again in the life of Jesus – this is what I ask of you. In the face of life's choices, life's temptation, the Word of God, especially the Word of God incarnated in Jesus is the ultimate answer to the "How then shall we live?" question.

I know that the WWJD, What Would Jesus Do?, bracelets were a fad. But it wasn't such a bad one. In fact, it was a pretty good one. In the face of life's choices, we could do a lot

worse than ask, “What would Jesus do?” I’ve just been around long enough to know that the hard part isn’t the asking, it’s not even in the having a pretty good idea as to the answer. The hard part isn’t knowing God’s Word, or knowing God’s will. The hard part is obeying it. The hard part is foregoing the good for me, now, consequence of our choices and choosing the good for someone else, good for all of us later choice.

That is exactly when we need to lean into the power of God’s Word. That is when we need to let it guide and sustain us. We can’t do this ourselves. We all need God’s help to stay on the right path. We need God’s help to get back on the right path when we go astray.

Fortunately that is when we can come back to that quote about God not being forgiving, and God not caring. Both are wrong as can be. God does care what we do. God desires our obedience. But not for God’s sake. For our own sake. Every temptation is a temptation precisely because of its potential to harm someone or something. God desires our obedience so that we don’t come to harm. God cares passionately what we do to ourselves and others because God cares passionately for us, for all of creation. God doesn’t want us to suffer. God desires our obedience because it is the path to wellbeing for all.

And yet, God is forgiving. When we go astray, when we rebel, which we, out of our human-ness, all do; God forgives. God is not some vindictive madman counting up all of our offenses and calculating just how to punish us. God is merciful and kind. In Jesus, God reached out to a broken world, to draw us back, to bring us home. And perhaps, to help us come to a higher form of obedience: not just doing what God wants, but wanting what God wants – all of creation restored, whole, at peace. Jesus called it the Kingdom of God. That is what Jesus came to call us to. In God’s Kingdom, we are called to be obedient servants. And also heirs, inheriting life-everlasting. Thanks be to God. Amen.