

TEMPTING CONCLUSIONS

Order of Service (bulletin)

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Lent 1

Genesis 2:25 - 3:7

Now, the woman and the man were both naked, though they were not ashamed. But the snake was even more naked: the most cunning of all the animals that [Adonai] had made. The snake asked the woman, “Did God really tell you not to eat from the trees in the garden?” The woman answered the snake, “We may eat fruit from all the other trees in the garden. But of the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden, God Said, ‘Don’t eat it and don’t touch it, or you will die.’” The snake said to the woman, “Die? You won’t die! God knows well that on the day that you eat it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil!” The woman knew that the tree was enticing to the eye and now saw that the fruit was good to eat - that it was desirable for the knowledge it could give. So, she took some of its fruit and ate it. She also gave some to the man beside her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked. So, they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led into the desert by the Spirit, to be tempted by the Devil. After fasting for forty days and forty nights, Jesus was hungry. Then the tempter approached and said, “If you are the Only Begotten, command these stones to turn into bread.” Jesus replied, “Scripture has it, ‘We live not on bread alone but on every utterance that comes from the mouth of God.’” Next the Devil took Jesus to the Holy City, set him up the parapet of the Temple and said, “If you are the Only Begotten, throw yourself down. Scripture has it, ‘God will tell the angels to take care of you; with their hands they will support you that you may never stumble on a stone.’” Jesus answered, “Scripture also says, ‘Do not put God to the test.’” The Devil then took Jesus up a very high mountain and displayed all the dominions of the world in their magnificence, promising, “All these I will give you if you fall down and worship me.” At this, Jesus said to the Devil, “Away with you, Satan! Scripture says, ‘You will worship the Most High God, God alone will you adore.’” At that the Devil left, and angels came and attended Jesus.



Welcome to the season of Lent. It is the church season that bridges the spring equinox in the northern hemisphere which means it's a time of lengthening days. The 40 days plus the Sundays before Easter is always the season of Lent. And because Easter is based on the lunar cycle it varies from year to year when it starts and when it ends. And because the 40 days doesn't include the Sundays, we still actually have 42 days

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left in the season of Lent. The colour, as you may guess, for the season in many church traditions is purple.

Maybe the origins of purple as the church colour for the season comes from a practice in the early centuries of the church. Certainly by the middle ages, the churches were filled with ornate decorative symbols including gold crosses and bedazzled jeweled ornaments. And there was some concern by some of the bishops that people might be too mesmerized by the beauty of these artifacts that they might miss the reflective, penetrative part of the season of Lent. And so there became a practice in some circles and it kind of caught on that during the season of Lent. They would cover them up so you couldn't see the wonderful beautiful golden crosses and the jewels. All you would see would be the purple cloth. Now purple cloth made sense as well because it was seen as the color of royalty in the ancient world. The dye needed to make the bright purple was rare and therefore was expensive and therefore really only used by the wealthy and royal classes. That was true in Jesus' day. As part of the story of Jesus' arrest and trial, soldiers mocked Jesus about the claims that Jesus was the ruler of the Jewish people and they put a crown of thorns on Jesus' head and placed a purple robe around him. Now, because of this reference to the condemned Jesus wearing the purple robe, purple was not really in the church seen as a symbol of royalty, but seen as a symbol of suffering and challenge and repentance and defeat. A time for somber reflection of how we might move through this moment?

The reality is that purple, which is much more accessible in our day, is far far more complex.

- In Alice Walker's novel, Shug Avery tells Celie that *ignoring the color purple in a field pisses God off*. You can't do that. You can't ignore purple in a field. And we've all seen purple flowers. In the novel The Color Purple, the color purple symbolizes not suffering or despair or penitence. It's joy, its beauty. It's a symbol of God's presence in everyday life.
- In the musical theater play written by Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik, Spring Awakening, which is a coming of age story of school age teens learning to understand the various depths of love and relationship and self-discovery and exploring deeper knowledge. The final song of the play is *The Song of Purple Summer*. I saw a documentary about this one time and the cast were wondering, what is a *purple summer*. And one of the actors said, "Well, I think Steven just needed a two-syllable word." But when Steven Sater, the lyricist, talked about it, he said that the spring awakening discoveries of love and of self often leave us wounded. So purple is the colour of the bruise that we still carry with us into the summer.

Purple is a complex and a very rich colour for a time we're in. It can remind us of affluence and abundance. It can remind us of suffering and the bruises. And it can be a sign of joy and healing and the very presence of God.

Each year on this first Sunday in the season of Lent, the Revised Common Lectionary gives us a version of the Jesus temptation time in the wilderness story. In the first year of the cycle, year A, we hear Matthew's version of it. In year B, we hear Mark's version, which is very short: Jesus went into the wilderness and was tempted. In year C, we hear Luke's version, which is pretty similar to Matthew's. As you can tell, since we read from Matthew today that we are in year A of the cycle. And in year A, we also get the garden temptation of Adam and Eve from Genesis. And so I sometimes like to refer to this year a combination of Genesis 3 and Matthew 4 as the flip Wilson lections. You may recall or you may be able to research that in the early 1970s, one of Wilson's characters, Geraldine Jones, had a catchphrase. *The devil made me do it*.

In the Greek language of Matthew's gospel, Jesus is tempted by *to diabolou*. *Diabolou* has Latin roots as a word and it comes from words that mean to throw across or to throw in front of and it refers to accusing someone or even in extreme cases slandering them: to throw things in front of them that get in the way of who they really are. Probably a fairly decent modern translation would be *to throw shade*. *Diabolou* is very similar in

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meaning to the Hebrew word, ha'satan, which literally means the one who accuses or the accuser has legal argument overtones. The person who argues against you in court. And so here Jesus tempter in the wilderness and the very words that are used are literally calling the accusing opponent, the arguer. Those words are usually rendered in the text in English as a proper name sounding word like Devil or Satan, but it really is more of a description than a name: the one who argues against you, the one who slanders you, the one who gets in the way of who you are. In Genesis, the tempter in the garden has even more of a personification. In this case, it's not a person, but it's an animal, a snake or a serpent. one of those creatures that God created as an unsuccessful companion for the first human. I have to admit that when I looked at the inclusive Bible translation of the Genesis reading today, I had to do a double take with the first couple verses. The first verse we heard today, the 25th verse of the second chapter, told us that the woman and the man were *naked*. And we're used to that part of the story. These human beings don't have any clothes on. And writing to a time where everybody wore clothes because they felt like the naked form was somehow something to be ashamed of. We're being told that they were naked, but they weren't ashamed. But then the very next verse, the first verse of the third chapter says that the snake was *even more naked*. And I had to look it up. Turns out that's a pretty decent translation. Although a lot of English translations will take the snake and instead of saying more naked, we'll say more crafty or more cunning or or more subtle (in the King James). A little Googling tells me the truth that both the people and the snake are described with the same word. a word that means or has roots in the phrase for to be smooth or bare: uncovered or open or revealed. Adam and Eve are physically naked and we imply an innocence there. The snake with that additional adjective "more" naked seems to be lacking a covering of integrity. The reader sees through the snake's intentions and its deception is exposed to the reader, but Adam and Eve don't see that. To them, the snake is as naked as they are.

Although there are people who will insist for you that tou diabolou or ha'satan is a real existing spiritual entity who actually works to mess up people's faithfulness with their relationship with God. Myself, I'm fine limiting the personification of temptation in passages like Matthew and and Genesis as a metaphorical or symbolic way to describe our ability as human beings to consider our options - to consider the short-term and the long-term benefits and consequences of things that are laid before us. Temptation is part of our own God-given free will decision-making process that will invite us to think about the tempting options that may lead us (in retrospect) down paths that are wise or paths that are less wise. Paths that impact our life in a positive way or paths that have negative impacts for ourselves or for others. Myself, I don't need a Faustian redskinned horned pseudo deity with a pitchfork in order to be tempted. You see, I have the capacity to do that all on my own. And actually, if you think about it, if we insist on this nonpersonified personification of temptation, the devil, the Satan, we are able to argue that we're not ultimately responsible for our choices. Geraldine had it right: the devil made me do it. It's not my fault.

The Genesis passage highlights for us the negative consequences of when we take things too literally rather than appreciating the richness of the imagery and the metaphor. If we read Genesis literally, did you know that snakes originally had legs? Because it's not until God doles out the punishments for this whole forbidden fruit episode that snakes are forced to slither on the ground. So presumably, they could walk in some way or another. These punishments also mean that the man has to farm for food as opposed to just gathering it. And even though the woman had never had children yet is told that childbirth is going to be painful. That's not really fair for Eve, is it at all? She never even had a chance to enjoy the pain-free childbirth.

More than that, though, reading this story literally can encourage you to feel like you can justify that women can be seen as naive and are prone to make unwise choices. Even though the words say that the man was right beside her, it's the woman who gets blamed for picking and eating the fruit implying Eve is responsible for Adam's decision to also eat the forbidden fruit As well, the words kind of imply that we should be ashamed of

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who we are starting with our own natural physical appearance; we should see that as not worthy of a description of who we are. And what that does is it opens the door to other aspects of who we are (that we don't control) that lead some to tell us that we need to be ashamed about. And finally, as we read the fuller part of the story, if you read on past what we had today, the words claim that we're not able to redeem ourselves from unwise choices, that we will be cast out, and that we'll be declared forever sinful.

Jesus chose to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. And the story goes that Jesus was affirmed as the heir of God and felt touched by the Spirit in that moment. And then Jesus chose to follow that up with time alone away from the comforts of the fertile riverbeds and the gathered communities. Luke also agrees with Matthew that Jesus doesn't eat for 40 days. Now whether that's a literal fact that Jesus consumed no food for 40 days or is simply a description of a very sparse diet that would be available in the wilderness. It leads us to the point where after 40 days, Jesus is unusually hungry: literally starving. And it sets up that first temptation. *Just make loaves of bread from these rocks that look like loaves of bread. If you're in fact God's heir, why don't you do that?* And here's what I think about that. I don't think Jesus had to wait 40 days to face that temptation. I mean, if Jesus had the ability and Jesus had the inclination and desire to turn stones to bread, I bet you that Jesus was thinking about that after a couple days. Jesus' time in the wilderness was a self-initiated isolation. He could have left at any time. And yet he seems to have chosen to resist the temptation to leave early or to miraculously make bread in order to be able endure the significantly theological number of 40 days to parallel the years that the Israelites spent in the wilderness.

I'm not going to spend time working on the various nuances of the specific three temptations about the miraculously creation of food or forcing God to choose to save you from a fatal fall or or using political or military power and wealth to ensure that you could reign supreme in the world. Because Jesus really is not tempted by the specifics of hunger and fame and power. But Jesus is tempted to turn Jesus' back on God: to turn Jesus back on the mission and the ministry that Jesus was moving into. Jesus symbolizes that by quoting several scripture passages to remain faithful within the traditions and the words that brought faith to his time. That final temptation went even further because it required not just rejecting God but forcing Jesus to submit to the tempter. In other words, to gain this authority, you are going to need to let your temptations lead you. And you're going to have to follow the path that the temptations lead. And this is the point in the story where Jesus says, "No, the temptation will not lead me. tempter, you will not lead me. Get behind me and my relationship and my faith is going to lead me forward."

For me, the symbolic lesson of Jesus' tempting time in the wilderness is that Jesus doesn't rush things. The main temptation that Jesus faces long before the tempter shows up in the story is to decide whether or not Jesus was going to take the time.

We do live in a time where we're invited to make decisions very quickly. We're invited to put them out into the world confidently as if we have everything that we need to know and we just say it and it's there. There's a news story that breaks and the like and the forward buttons beckon us to click. Don't think, just tell me what you think. And there are some who will look back and say, well, I can't regret anything because it's made me who I am. I mean, it may be tempting to reach a quick conclusion, but that's seldom the wise path. Every one of us knows from experience that drawing a conclusion before important information becomes known is always the least best path in the long term. Quick conclusions take away our ability to understand nuance, our ability to understand complexion, an inability to understand what we initially might see as the worst in someone else. Situations are seldom: eat the apple, bad; don't eat the apple, good.

Lent is a gift. Lent is a gift of time. A time to slow down. A time to reflect. A time to watch our world come back

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to life, especially where we live. A time to learn. and a time to evaluate what burdens and what opportunities we might choose to carry with us as we move forward in this Lenten time in both the affluence and the bruise of the purple.

May we consider choosing what Jesus chose, the time.

Amen.

#115VU Jesus Tempted in the Desert

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