

Lent 01 A 2017
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 & Matthew 4:1-11
March 5, 2017 :: Fr. Jim Cook

“Gifts and Temptations.”

This morning, we heard two really fascinating stories about temptation — *and* about good and bad ways to deal with temptation.

In fact, these two stories — from Genesis and Matthew — are a perfect pairing for a sermon given in the Season of Lent. So, let’s have a look at them.

First, our reading from Genesis 2.

One thing we need to know is that, in the verses leading up to our reading, we were told how God created Adam and Eve, and then how God gave them a garden paradise to call home. So far so good.

However, in today’s reading from Genesis, we learn that it didn’t take very long for temptation to present itself; for it to triumph over Adam and Eve; for a paradise, only recently gained, to be lost; and for Adam and Eve to be left with nothing but fig leaves and regrets.

And then, in our reading from Matthew 4, we learn that, after his baptism, Jesus was driven into a wilderness that is as far from a garden paradise as one can get.

And so, unlike Adam and Eve, who faced their trials and temptations amid ease and plenty, Jesus faces his trials and temptations at a time when he is exhausted, starving, and alone.

What does reading these two stories side by side tell us? Well, clearly, when it comes to temptations, Jesus is the winner and Adam and Eve are the losers. So, maybe one thing we’re supposed to get from these two stories, is that it’s better to be like Jesus, than like Adam and Eve. That’s not a bad lesson to learn. And it fits nicely into the theme of the Season of Lent, which is all about helping us to become more like Jesus.

Now, if we stopped our analysis of these two stories right there, that would probably be alright, because it’s always a good idea, now and then, to take stock of

ourselves, and ask ourselves: “Since the last time I checked, have I become more like Jesus, or less?”

Generally speaking, that’s a good thing to do every now and then, because life can be challenging, and we need to be “spiritually fit” in order to respond appropriately to those challenges. But there’s more to these stories than simply what I’ve just talked about.

Because what we also need to remember is that what makes the story of Adam and Eve a true story, is not that it accurately describes something that happened a long time ago. *That’s almost beside the point.* What makes the story of Adam and Eve a true story, is the fact that it describes exactly what life is like, here and now.

It’s a story that tells the truth about us. Because, just like Adam and Eve, we are frequently confronted with things which, on the one hand, look really attractive, but which, on the other hand, may not be what God has in mind for us. And in those moments when we have to make a choice, it’s better by far to be spiritually strong like Jesus, than spiritually weak like Adam and Eve.

So there really is some truth to the notion that it’s a good thing for us to take the time, and to put forth the effort — for example, through the Lenten disciplines of fasting, prayer, study, and renewal — to put forth the effort to “pump up our spiritual muscles.”

However, as valuable as it may be to approach these two stories in this way, there are some risks to this approach. For one thing, all this talk about “getting into shape” could lead into a sort of macho spirituality — sort of like the young monk who bragged that he could fast any other monk in the monastery right under the table. That misses the point of spiritual growth.

Another risk from this approach, is that we might come away from them with a mistaken idea of what victory is really all about. So, let’s look again at what’s going on in the story of Jesus’ temptation.

He has fasted and prayed for a long time, and he’s famished and exhausted from the effort it takes to sustain something like that. In other words, he’s not at his best. And this is when the temptations hit him.

Now, I suspect that if the temptations had come upon Jesus on a good day, he would have done things differently. He probably would have come up with all

sorts of clever responses, or told a few insightful parables, and generally put the devil in his place. But he doesn't have that kind of energy or strength.

I suspect that most of us can relate to the situation Jesus was in. Because we've all been faced with temptations that came to us when we were out of resources. In fact, that's when they generally hit us the hardest! And the problem wasn't that we weren't spiritually strong enough; it's just that, and for whatever reason, we allowed our spiritual tanks to get empty.

[And that, for me, is one of the best arguments for attending church, and praying, regularly.]

But, back to Jesus. There he is in the wilderness, completely out of gas, and being tempted, *really* tempted. But look at what happens. Jesus does not say one word of his own in response to any of the temptations. He simply quotes scripture. Because he has no resources of his own, he simply holds on to God, and lets God's words work through him.

[And that happens to be for me, as good an argument as any for reading the Bible regularly.]

And the outcome of this encounter, although it is a victory, it's not a victory that comes from a personal, spiritual strength. Rather, it's a victory that comes as a gift from God. It's a victory that comes about because Jesus is willing to surrender to God, and rely upon God's strength, and God's resources.

And even though I'm certain that the time Jesus spent in the wilderness gave him a better relationship with God, I'm equally certain that it gave him *something more*: it gave him the insight and the courage to surrender — and therefore to depend, not on his own best efforts, but on an emptiness that can only be filled by God, and that can only be received as a gift of grace.

And that's a hard lesson to learn, but it's also an important lesson to learn. Jesus learned it in forty days; but it may take us a lifetime.

Several months after this all happened, Jesus said to his disciples, "When you are handed over to your enemies, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time." I would be willing to bet that, when he said those words, Jesus was thinking about his experience in the wilderness. And it was advice he could give to others, because it was a lesson he learned personally.

In the end, becoming strong spiritually, and developing a deep and rich spiritual life, is never about us. It's never about what we can accomplish or achieve.

Rather, it's always about God, and about what God can do *for* us. And what God would like to be able to do *for others through us*. And it's about surrendering ourselves, and emptying ourselves, so that we can receive God's gifts.

And if we can do that, we'll learn that these are gifts which will never ever fail.

Amen.