

Sermon: The Temptations We Inherit

Year A, First Sunday in Lent

[Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11](#)

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Oh the serpent in the garden and the two trees and Mama Eve and Papa Adam. It can be tricky to reflect on this story, because most of us aren't hearing what Howard just read. Mostly we're hearing the story about evil and original sin and how women brought sin into the world and the devil and I don't know what else. Whatever we were taught when we were kids. It's hard to reflect on this family story, because like a lot of family stories there are so many versions of it.

And like a lot of family stories, there's no point in arguing who's right and who's wrong. Let's just add another version, and see what that does the stories you already know. Because that's what we do with family stories. We fit them together

Back in the day, when Mama Eve and Papa Adam were just starting out, they had a job in God's garden. They had a vocation,¹ they had a calling from God, to take care of the garden God had made for them. Just as God had made them, by breathing God's very own breath into them, by making them in God's image. They were free to eat their fill in that garden. All except the fruit of one tree. So they had freedom, but God had put a constraint on that freedom, in their best interest, so they could flourish.² To be clear, God said that if they ate the fruit of that one tree, they would die (Genesis 2:17).

Then along comes the crafty snake, not evil, not the devil, just your garden variety crafty, talking snake. The snake asks a couple of questions, doesn't do anything, just gets Mama Eve and Papa Adam thinking about things. Eve may have done the talking, but Adam was with her (Genesis 3:6) the whole time the Bible says. Eve explains how they're not supposed to eat from that tree or they'll die. And the snake says, "*You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.*" (Genesis 3:4-5)

"Knowing good and evil" – does that mean we didn't know good from evil before? Maybe. But I think if you can't tell the difference, then what does it matter if you can tell them apart? I think the interesting part here was who gets to decide what is good and evil. Eat the fruit, and *you will be like God*, the crafty snake said. You will be the one making the call.³

God put us in the garden and drew a line and said, "You have complete freedom. But I'm telling you for your own sake, stay on your side of the line. Because you aren't God. And that's what you need to be when you cross over to this side of the line." And then we crossed over. We had everything we needed; we were never hungry, our kids were never hungry. We crossed the line that God had been really clear about, and now we were going to be hungry at times. Famished even. We added hunger to our family tree.

But that's not the only family story we heard today. We heard the story about Brother Jesus. He had just been baptized by Cousin John, in the waters of the River Jordan. And when he rose up

¹ Allen C. McSween, Jr., "First Sunday in Lent, Pastoral Perspective, Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 2*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 26.

² McSween, 26.

³ McSween, 28.

out of the waters, there was a voice from heaven saying, ‘*This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*’ (Matthew 3:17). Brother Jesus leaves the Jordan and goes into the desert and fasts and prays for 40 days and 40 nights. A long, long time. He’s famished, beyond hunger, empty. All he has left is what he knows by heart – the Scriptures that he loves and the promise given to him at his baptism that he is somebody.⁴ All Jesus has is who he is; he is beloved of God, no matter what.⁵

When we are famished, because our stomachs are empty, because our souls are empty, that’s the thing we forget most quickly. We forget who we are.⁶ And when the Tempter shows up from the outside world, always with perfect timing, there’s a pattern to it. “If you are the Son of God” (Matthew 4:3), “if,” “if,” “if.” If you are so beloved, then prove it. Do something. Impress me. Because I’m not going to believe who you are until you prove it to me,⁷ on my terms.

When we are in the wilderness and have forgotten who we are because we have been so emptied out by the demands of life, some of which we’ve placed on ourselves, then the greatest temptation is not bread or power, but to let go of what we know. You are beloved of God. It’s who you are. No conditions. Nothing to prove. Nothing to earn. God’s love is not conditional.⁸ We shouldn’t let anything tempt us into believing that it is. Because believing it’s conditional, that just keeps us starving in the wilderness.

So Brother Jesus is in the wilderness, famished. And three times the crafty Tempter brings him up to the line. If you are the Son of God, do the bread thing (Matthew 4:3). Do the angel thing (Matthew 4:6). Do the falling down and worshipping thing (Matthew 4:9). And three times, Jesus says, “No. I’ll stay on my side of the line.”

Mama Eve and Papa Adam, they step over the line, and they find humanity a curse.⁹ They tried to be God, and did not do terribly well as human beings.¹⁰ Brother Jesus stayed behind the line and made humanity a blessing.¹¹ He was content to remain a human being and became known as the Son of God.¹²

But here’s the thing about a family story. We have both sets of genes in us.¹³ We are kin to both.¹⁴ Most of the days of our lives, we feel the pull of one or the other, or even both. We are so, so tempted to play God and decide what is good and what is evil. And recently, we seem to have taken it one step further and decided *who* is good and *who* is evil. We’re making ourselves and everyone around us miserable.

So why not swing over to the other side of the family tree? The Brother Jesus who is in us is more able to remain human,¹⁵ and keep us company on the human side of the line. The Brother

⁴ Anna Carter Florence, “First Sunday in Lent,” in *Preaching Year A with Anna Carter Florence: Reflections on the Gospel Readings (2016-2017) Revised Common Lectionary*. (St. Paul, MN: Luther Seminary, 2016), 42.

⁵ Florence, 42.

⁶ Florence, 42.

⁷ Florence, 42.

⁸ Florence, 42.

⁹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Remaining Human.” *The Christian Century* 113, no. 5 (1996): 127.

¹⁰ Taylor, 127.

¹¹ Taylor, 127.

¹² Taylor, 127.

¹³ Taylor, 127. The argument in this whole paragraph comes from her work.

¹⁴ Taylor, 127.

¹⁵ Taylor, 127.

Jesus that is within us is showing us that the way to discover our divine nature is not to cross the line and curse our humanity, but to bless it, and keep ahold of who we are.¹⁶ We are beloved of God. We have nothing to prove to anyone, least of all ourselves. We can leave the wilderness and its hungers if we lean into the Brother Jesus within ourselves and remember that we are beloved of God. We are made in God's image.

Yes, we inherit temptations. Mama Eve and Papa Adam are always there, looking longingly over the line. But Brother Jesus is there too, with us on the only too human side. We enter into this life, on this side of Eden, where God made us from the dust of this earth and breathed life into us.¹⁷ And where God continues to breathe life into us again and again and again. Where God's mercy is so great that even when promised death, God gives us life. Again and again and again. Make sure when you tell the family story to yourself next time, you tell the whole story.

¹⁶ Taylor, 127.

¹⁷ Taylor, 127.