

These Forty Days – Gen 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Matt 4:1-11 – March 5, 2017

The Season of Lent is officially here. It arrived without much fanfare this past week on Ash Wednesday. Each year I think it's good for us to have a little refresher course as to what the season of Lent is all about. Historically, in the early church it was the time that new Christians went through a period of intense preparation and instruction prior to their baptism at Easter. It was a time of learning and growth as they approached their upcoming entrance into the church through their baptisms.

So too for us, Lent is a time of preparing oneself and about growing in one's faith. Traversing the six weeks of Lent is like going on a journey and our destination is Easter Sunday. The lessons we learn along the way during Lent will better prepare us for understanding the message of Easter. It is a time for us to slow down, reflect and examine where we are in our lives of faith. At the beginning of Lent we are called to acknowledge our sinfulness, to confess our sins, to turn from our sins, and to receive the forgiveness that God graciously gives to us. Sin is what keeps us from having a relationship with God and with people. Sin disrupts and distorts what is good. Sin separates us from others. Sin puts self first.

Sin is more than just a way of defining immoral or selfish actions. Sin is the attitude within ourselves that tells us we deserve to have what we want. It's the attitude that convinces us that our needs are more important than the needs of others. It's the delusion that claims that we are in control of our lives and our destinies. As we begin this journey toward Easter, we are called to confront sin in our lives. We are called to recognize our self-seeking desires and turn from them, seeking forgiveness from the God who understands our dilemma and who offers immeasurable grace to us.

Our two scripture lessons for today are related to this idea of sin. Our lessons examine the subject of temptation. What is temptation? Temptation is the act of being enticed or lured by an outside source to do something one would not normally do. Generally it carries the connotation of being persuaded to do something wrong or evil.

Let's take a simple example. A plate of cookies is not necessarily a bad thing. It could actually be seen as a wonderful treat. However in certain circumstances, the plate of cookies could be a source of temptation. A child enters the kitchen and spies the plate of cookies cooling on the counter top. Mother has already said, no cookies until after dinner. The aroma coming from the cookies causes the child's mouth to water. The child quickly glances around. No one is in the room. No one will know. The child reaches up and takes a cookie. Somewhere in that scenario, a simple desert has become a temptation.

That same plate of cookies is now sitting in the break room at your place of employment, or on the coffee table at a friend's home, or as free samples at the local grocery store. You come in. You're struggling with watching your calories. You've been diagnosed with diabetes and need to avoid excess sugar. You struggle with the temptation of taking a cookie. You rationalize, will one cookie really make a difference? You make concessions or try to bargain – I'll eat the cookie now, and then eat less calories at dinner. Or you dismiss the consequences altogether, it's my life and if I want a cookie, I'm going to eat a cookie.

Temptations can come in a variety of forms and from a myriad of sources. Temptations lure us into doing something we know is wrong. Tempters try to convince us that we really want to do whatever it is that they are promoting. Marketing companies understand the concept of temptation. For them it's about selling something. It's about making the consumer believe that his or her world is incomplete without their product. That his or her life will benefit by owning their product. And so they have to convince the consumer to want their product.

Temptation is not about coercion, forcing someone to do something against his or her will. It's about attraction. Temptation is so powerful because it makes us think that we really want to do something even though we know it's wrong. We convince ourselves that the benefits outweigh any negative consequences. But the bottom line is - temptation is about who or what is in control of our lives.

Our reading from the book of Genesis tells us the story of the first humans and their need to be in control of their lives. The text reads, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat you shall die."

What is it about human nature that causes us to want to push the limits? When someone draws a line in the sand, we want to cross over it. What makes us want to see if the grass truly is greener on the other side of the fence? Any time a limit is given, there seems to be that underlying desire to challenge it. And that desire is inherent within us from an early age. Just look at the actions of any small child. Always testing the limits – playing with granddads pocket knife after being told not to, teasing the cat after being warned she has sharp claws. And then there are the consequences – a cut from the knife, a scratch from the cat. The child responds with astonishment – a harsh lesson learned.

Who knew the results of disobedience would be so tragic? Bad choices often bring dreadful consequences. In our story from Genesis, Adam and Eve were faced with a choice. The serpent posed the temptation, made the disobedience sound attractive, and in short order

the couple succumbed. One result of this disobedience was the loss of innocence. They got what they wanted. Their eyes were opened. They indeed gained knowledge – they experienced shame and vulnerability for the first time as they recognized their nakedness, they experienced fear for the first time and hid from God, and they experienced estrangement for the first time from one another and from God.

At its most basic point, this is a story about disobedience, about pushing the limits, about wanting to be in complete control. Rev. Sheila Gustafson made this observation, “The danger is, of course, that having eaten the fruit, having gained the knowledge, we are often not equipped to deal with the consequences of what we know, of what we are able to do, and with the devastating discovery that, even with all of this knowledge, we are still not in control of all the circumstances of our lives.” (from a sermon entitled “Snake Bite,” Feb 25, 1996)

The God-given limits are in place for a reason. The boundaries, the restrictions – they all serve a function. But we still cross that line from temptation into sin, because we want to be in control. We don’t want someone else telling us what we can and can’t do. Apparently even when that someone else is God.

Our second temptation story comes from Matthew’s gospel. Still dripping from his baptism in the waters of the Jordan River, Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the desert. For the next forty days and forty nights, Jesus fasted. This time in the wilderness was to prepare him for his upcoming ministry. What happened here would lay the groundwork for what was to come.

At the end of the forty days, Jesus was not surprisingly very hungry. He was probably also lonely, weary, exhausted. It would not hard to believe that his defenses were at their lowest. His ministry lay before him, but it had not yet taken shape. And onto the scene comes the devil, with temptation on his mind.

Appealing to his obvious physical need, the devil tempts him to turn stones into loaves of bread. But Jesus won’t bite. He refuses to use his power for his own benefit. Instead he trusts only in God to provide for his needs. Then the devil whisks Jesus away to the holy city, up on the highest pinnacle of the temple. He tempts Jesus to jump off in order to be rescued by God. The people below would witness the rescue and would be swayed into following Jesus through this miraculous sign. But again, Jesus won’t succumb. His path is to follow God’s will for his life, not to force God’s hand in a show of a mighty display of power. For the third temptation, the devil takes Jesus to a high mountain, where he can see all the kingdoms of the world. “They’ll be yours,” claims the devil, “if you simply fall down and worship me.”

The temptation is to gain worldly success and power – a seductive temptation indeed, for if he were in political control, Jesus could enforce the rule of God. But the lure of cheap power is no match for Jesus' faith in God.

These three temptations all had to do with power and control. Would Jesus use his power to control his own destiny? Or would he turn from these temptations and keep God as the one in control of his life? Ultimately who was in control of his life, himself or God? That is the question we must answer for ourselves whenever we are faced with temptation.

God wants the best for us, but we have to choose the best. God gives us the freedom to choose between good and evil, between righteous living and our selfish desires. Each one of us has the choice to be obedient or disobedient. Like Adam and Eve, we sometimes make poor choices, but the good news is God keeps extending forgiveness and grace to us.

During the season of Lent we are called to introspection and self-examination. We are to examine ourselves and study the choices we make. We are constantly faced with various temptations to put our own needs and ourselves first. This is the time for us to see who is truly in control of our lives. Are we the masters of our lives, or is God in control? Do we allow Christ to work in us and through us? Do we accept his forgiveness and grace and in so doing, allow that forgiveness and grace to flow through us and touch the lives of those around us?

The grace of Jesus Christ is exceedingly greater than our sin. And grace often turns up when we least expect it. We will make bad choices in our lives, that much is true. But we don't have to let those choices define us. Grace is freely available, we must simply make the choice to accept it.