

Lenten Journey - Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11 – March 1, 2020

As we begin our journey of Lent together, our scripture lessons this morning give us a good picture of temptation and sin. Those are not topics that we really like to talk about, because when we do talk about them, we risk noticing the places in our lives where we fall short, leading us to feelings of shame and guilt and regret. And truly, no one likes those feelings.

But the Season of Lent encourages us to own our sinful natures, to confess and turn away from our sins, and to freely receive God's gracious forgiveness. The sin in our lives has a detrimental effect on our relationships – with God, with others and with ourselves. Sin disruptive, distorting those things in life that are 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 six week 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.

One of the most common examples of temptation is this – a plate of yummy cookies. Dad spent all afternoon baking chocolate chip cookies for Coffee Hour at church tomorrow. The aroma has alerted the young child of their presence in the kitchen. She sneaks in while dad is in another room. She's conflicted. She knows she's not allowed to have treats before dinner, but they smell so good! She rationalizes, one cookie won't make a difference. And no one is around to see her if she decides to take one. Suddenly, a delicious treat has become a temptation.

Those same cookies are now sitting on a plate on the table in the church Parlor. You are in line when you spy their chocolaty goodness. You've just been diagnosed with diabetes, and you need to avoid excess sugar. But those cookies are calling your name. You struggle with the temptation of taking one. 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 sugar later on. 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 astonished tears – 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, the two humans 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.

Then along comes the devil with temptation on his mind. Hungry and weary after these days in the desert, Jesus is physically worn down. The temptations that are offered to him would make his upcoming ministry so much easier, should he accept them. But the three temptations that the devil offered to him were about 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? The question he had to answer for himself was – who was in control of his life, himself or God? Would he trust God to lead and provide for him, or would he do it on his own? That is the question we must answer for ourselves whenever we are faced with temptation. Who do we answer to? God or ourselves?

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 the humans in the Genesis story, 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 inward journey. 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.