

Texts: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

We begin our journey into Lent this year, as we do every year, by reading the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. We read it from a different gospel each year, but we always read it on the first Sunday of Lent. Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell the story slightly differently, but all agree that after Jesus was baptized in the Jordan, the Spirit led him into the wilderness, where he stayed for 40 days and nights, and that he was tempted by the devil.

Forty days in the wilderness. Forty days of Lent. Forty days is a long time. Close to six weeks. Long enough to be seriously weakened by hunger, if you are fasting like Jesus did. Long enough to be seriously weakened by the harshness of the desert. Long enough to be open to temptation.

This year we also read the story of the first human characters in the Bible – Adam and Eve – and the beginning of all the trouble that we call “original sin.”

It wasn't supposed to be this way. God formed the man Adam from the ground and breathed life into him. God enlisted the man Adam to help assist in the work of creation by giving him the job of naming all the animals. God created a partner for the man Adam by making a woman out of his very body. God put the man Adam and the woman Eve in the garden of Eden with instructions to till it and keep it, to serve it and to steward it.

It is not as though Adam and Eve had been weakened by fasting or the harshness of the desert. God had given them everything they needed. Yet even in Eden, the serpent finds a way to get deep down, to call into question

the trust that they are supposed to place in God their creator. “There is something missing in your life,” he says. “There is something that God isn’t telling you.”

“You will be like God,” says the serpent. And isn’t that really what every one of us wants to hear? We want to think that we are the center of our own lives. We want to trust in our own abilities. We want to make something of ourselves. We want to decide for ourselves what is good and what is evil.

Temptation is something that each of us can understand. Jesus’ experience of temptation is one of the ways that I know that Jesus was truly human.

The temptations that the devil presents to Jesus are the same that the serpent presents to Adam and Eve. “You will be like God.” The temptations that Jesus endured encompass all human experience and desire.

First, the devil invited Jesus to turn stones into bread. In other words, to make material goods his highest value. We know this one very well. An entire advertising industry exists to offer us the chance to make ourselves into someone entirely new, by purchasing products that will make us look younger, thinner, stronger, desirable, popular, you get my drift.

Next, the devil offered Jesus the chance to “throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple” – to see if God would indeed send angels to save his life. This is the temptation to test God, rather than to trust God. Bad things do happen to good people. Disease and illness, bankruptcy, failed marriages, accidents, natural disasters. We know the temptation to blame

God for what happens to you or your loved ones, rather than to entrust yourself to God's everlasting love.

And finally, the devil offered Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor" in exchange for turning away from God. This is the temptation for power, to have it, to exercise it and to control other people through it. From the earliest struggles over toys in the sandbox to the wars that cripple nations and cause untold suffering, the desire for power turns people away from the source of all life and puts them into conflict with each other.

We know these temptations ourselves. We know what it is to want to fill the empty spaces, to want to lord it over other people, to want never have anything bad happen, to want be protected, safe, warm, healthy, wealthy. To have all our desires met.

But what is the devil really saying here? What is the devil offering? The devil offers a transaction: "IF you worship me," he says, "THEN it will all be yours. If you are the Son of God, then do something miraculous." Let's make a deal. We know how literature and movies have portrayed the devil: as a wheeler-dealer. Sell your soul to me, and I will give you – well, you name it: fame, fortune, good health, beautiful children, talent, you get the idea. The devil offers Jesus a contract: IF you hold up your end, THEN I'll provide.

The devil's deal is as slick as any advertising campaign. What is the place in your life that seems empty? Fill it yourself. Place your trust in something besides God to make your life meaningful. Feed yourself. Put

God to work for you. Place yourself in charge. You will be like God. The language of “If/then” is always the language of contract, not the language of God’s covenant. The devil’s deal requires that we be the first to act.

This is not God’s desire for us. God doesn’t make a deal. In love, God’s action comes first. There is no “if/then.” There is only “because and therefore”: “Because I love you, therefore you shall be my people.” Even when God sets out commandments, expectations and rules, God’s unconditional love always comes first. God will long for us and be disappointed in us when we turn to our own devices. God will call us to return to God’s ways, God will rejoice when we do God’s will. But there is never a deal, never a bargain to be made. God’s love is not a contract. God does not ask any of us to be the first to act. God’s love is promised to us, no matter what.

We have just spent some time this morning brainstorming on the word “welcome” – what it means and what it looks like. We have come up with some very good ideas. But we need to be careful – because we can be tempted to put limits on our welcome. We can be tempted to offer a welcome only to people who look like us and sound like us, rather than doing the hard work of building community.

I expect that every one of you is doing something to honor this Lenten season, that you are doing some kind of fasting, praying and almsgiving in these 40 days. But we need to be careful, because it is so easy to be tempted to celebrate our own pious “giving up” or “adding on,” rather than connecting our Lenten disciplines to the world outside these doors.

What good does it do you to give up French fries or pop or chocolate if you do not link your own hunger to the one in nine people in the world who suffer from chronic undernourishment?

What good does it do to pray for someone else if you do not stop to listen for God's voice in your own heart and allow God's call into your own life?

What good does it do to make a gift to a charitable organization or cause if you do not also consider what needs to change politically, socially and economically to eliminate the need for that organization?

The good news is: It all begins in your baptism. This morning's scene of Jesus' temptation comes directly after his baptism. It's the same for each one of us, too. Being baptized does not mean that life gets easier. Quite the opposite. Being baptized means that life gets more complicated. Baptism leads us to care about people we have never met and never will meet. Baptism calls us to work for a just and peaceful world. Baptism gives us the ability to reject the "if/then" of the devil's empty bargain.

In our baptism, God's promises come first. Baptism is not a sign of our acceptance of Christ. It is a sign of Christ's acceptance of us. In our baptism, we are freed in Christ to love and serve our neighbors nearby and far away.

Because Jesus Christ died and rose for you, therefore you are forgiven and redeemed. That is the unconditional language of God's love. We know that we cannot, by ourselves, uphold our end of any bargain. We know that

we are tempted again and again and again, and that sometimes – no, often – we fail. But God’s promises come to us time and time and time again.

The forty days of Lent have just begun and we follow Jesus into the wilderness. In these forty days of Lent we will remember Jesus’ journey to the cross. In these 40 days of Lent, we remember *WHO* we are. We remember *WHOSE* we are. Today we find that Jesus is not far off, but right here, walking beside us in our own journey through the Lenten desert. Today we find that Jesus’ answer to the devil overcomes our own inability to answer. We find Jesus right here among us today, coming to us in wine and bread and the water of baptism. Today we remember God’s unconditional promise that we are God’s very own.