

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7
March 13, 2011

South Plains

Temptation: Gains and Losses

Last summer, Debby and I were invited to a barn burning. A heavy snow during winter had collapsed the roof. Rather than dismantle it, they offered it to the volunteer fire department as a practical test for the fire fighters. It was trial by fire. The biblical word for that kind of trial is *peirosmos*. The same word can be used for trial, test or temptation. The Matthew story says that Jesus endured three temptations or trials. He is proving his identity as the Son of God. The familiar story of the temptation of Adam and Eve is their trial, where they prove themselves to be unfaithful as children of God.

It may be easier to accept the Adam and Eve temptation than to imagine God tempting or testing Jesus Christ, God's own Son. We need to remember that in addition to being divine, Jesus was completely human. It is his humanity that makes the salvation of our humanity possible. We might think of the two temptation stories as bookends to the story of humankind. In the beginning of our story, we got into trouble. Now, almost at the end, this is how God will get us out of trouble, by sending the God-man to save us. First, he must pass three tests. John Milton says this is paradise regained

I don't know about you, but even a routine traffic stop makes me nervous when I'm asked to produce my

driver's license and automobile registration. Can I find them? Is everything in order? I'm being tested. Now, whether or not Jesus had those butterflies, he certainly knew the stakes were high.

Adam and Eve were being tested in the garden: "Here Eve! Eat this. It won't hurt you. As a matter of fact, you'll feel better because you will see the world through new eyes. You will know how the world really works. You will know the difference between good and evil." Put that way, it's easy to see why they ate the fruit. It was good in every way except that it was forbidden.

I think both temptation stories are given to us as descriptions of the way temptation and sin work. The serpent was at least halfway right: our eyes have been opened. We have the knowledge of good and evil. We cannot imagine normal, productive human life without that knowledge, that ability to discriminate between both good and evil, and more importantly, between good, better and best. We have gained much, but we have also lost much. So, I want to talk about gains and losses.

First the losses: We have lost our innocence. We are not surprised by the presence of evil. We have come to expect it. The normality of evil in the world is part of the loss of innocence. We know all too well that the pleasures of good and evil are real, and we know that those pleasures have to be weighed against the pains caused by evil. We know how good apples can taste, and ice cream, cup cakes and drugs of all kinds. There's

a popular perfume called “Temptation” because the very name attracts buyers. We’ve lost our innocence.

We have also lost confidence, the confidence of God that we can be trusted and the confidence of one another. Good parents may have confidence that their child can be trusted to make good choices. But, wise parents will also be confident that some bad choices will be made. “It’s wonderful that Jimmy’s mother has invited you to come over to his house this afternoon! Will his mother be there? Good. See you at 5:30 for supper.” Scarcely has the boy or girl left the house before the parent is on the telephone confirming that indeed Jimmy’s mother will be home.

Childhood and adolescence are a series of temptations. In fact, throughout our lives, we are at risk of making bad choices. Nothing is guaranteed. We know a lot. We know good from evil. We know that it’s easier to stay out of trouble than it is to get out of trouble. Nevertheless, we are not only at risk, we seem prone to make bad choices. Like a certain basketball team, with all our advantages we are still at a loss.

There are, however, some gains, some pluses to our situation, if we will recognize them and use them well. The loss of innocence is compensated by gaining a sense of shame and embarrassment. Wasn’t it Mark Twain who said human beings are the only animal that blushes... or needs to? The concluding line in our Genesis reading says that when they tasted the

forbidden fruit, “the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.”

Of course, guilt is not appreciated as much as it might be by modernity. Psychologists have rightly distinguished between real and imagined guilt. Imagined guilt can haunt our sleep and twist our lives into paralyzing knots. Much of the criticism of guilt is about imagined guilt, that sense of shame for something we did not do.

On the other hand, real guilt serves several useful purposes. It can make us realistic about our innocence. There is something pitiful about the person proclaiming that he or she is blameless in a tragedy when all the world is waiting for that person to take responsibility.

Real guilt can also provide a clear signal that we need to make a change in our lives or at least become more cautious. Real guilt is like those flashing lights on the 250 bypass alerting us that the traffic light has turned red at the next intersection. “Slow down. Think about where you are and where you’re going.”

Sometimes guilt can motivate us to do better in similar situations. Coach K once lost a basketball game and made the team watch the tape of the game as they rode home on the bus. He wanted the players to remember why they were going to practice harder than ever the next week.

Those fig leaves should be a constant reminder to Adam and Eve and to us that we live in a fallen world, a realistic world of consequences. Of course, guilt can open the door to confession and forgiveness. I'm afraid that even some Christians shy away from the season of Lent and its dark colors, its music in a minor key with no alleluias, its sobering scripture readings. They suppose Lent has been designed to make people feel bad if not guilty. Quite the opposite is the case. Lent wants to open the conversation with God by putting temptation and sin on the table for discussion. Pretending that guilt can be erased is foolish. We've lost our innocence, and guilt can make us healthier in all our relationships, especially our relationship with God.

The other gain from realizing our loss of God's confidence and the loss of the confidence of our fellow human beings is realism. Because we have lost something precious to sin and evil, we will be tested again and again. These trials and temptations will not always be pleasant or welcome. Yet, they can make us stronger. God does not leave us alone with temptation. God assumes neither that we will choose rightly nor that we will choose wrongly. We have trustworthy guidance in the words of scripture. We have the friendship of other believers who help us stay on track. We have the presence of the Holy Spirit. If only we will listen to our help. The Englishman Samuel Butler commented that "Conscience is thoroughly well-bred and soon leaves off talking to those who do not wish to hear it."

We can have confidence in God's willingness to guide and to forgive when we fail. God wants to grant new life in Christ. That forgiveness and new life wait only on our having confidence in Jesus. That's the meaning of faith that we trust in what has been provided as the way out of guilt for our mistakes.

I like the TV commercial with the green line leading an investor toward a comfortable and secure financial life. We all know investments don't work that easily, but I love the image of a person who not only has a clear, green line to follow, but also has the friendly advisor calling down the street when the temptation of a flashy car appears, "Don't forget to follow the green line."

That's my ideal of the Christian life. A path to follow and friends who will remind me "Don't forget to follow Jesus Christ."

The story of the temptations of Jesus is Matthew's attempt to give us confidence in Jesus' ability to save. Tempted by food, fame and fortune, just as we are tempted. Having only the help of scripture and the Holy Spirit, just as we have that help. Jesus does not falter. He is our champion, or as the book of Hebrews says, he is the pioneer of our salvation. The pioneers who followed the rivers upstream to piedmont Virginia and who came down the valley and across the mountains did two things. First, they showed the way, proving that the trials of forests and mountains could be overcome.

Second, they made the way smoother for the rest of us, turning trials into trails. When Francis Makemie, the founder of the Presbyterian Church in America, was arrested for preaching without a license, he was put on trial. In 1707 Makemie threw down the gauntlet in favor of religious toleration in the new world, and the momentum for religious freedom has continued ever since.

When Jesus tells the devil, "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him," he strikes a blow for our freedom from sin, and more importantly, the way is opened for us to follow him. The season of Lent reminds us that we are not victims of evil. Be confident that the grace of God is ours in Christ Jesus. The promise of spring is Easter, the new life in Christ.