

# **Temptation and Transformation**

## ***A Sermon from Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church***

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**February 10, 2008 – First Sunday in Lent**

**Scripture Readings: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32;  
Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11**

I think I was about seven when it happened. I was playing at the home of my best friend, who lived down the street. She had the most amazing doll house. It had electric lights and tiny carpets and curtains and even little pots and pans in the kitchen and a teeny little fruit bowl with miniature apples on the kitchen table that was covered with a miniature red checkered table cloth.

One day, when my friend wasn't looking, I slipped a tiny china vase from the miniature end table in the living room into my pocket just before I left for home. I stole it.

I knew it was wrong. I knew it was stealing. But I took it anyway.

Now, in retrospect I can tell you more about me and about my friend. But all the rest of this comes from an adult looking back on the event. I can no longer remember what was going on in my seven year old mind.

The doll house was in my friend's room, which she had all to herself. Her practically perfect room, with soft green carpet and a canopy bed dressed in a rosebud print bedspread and dust ruffle.

I didn't have a room to myself or a doll house. And I'm not sure that I didn't know, even at the tender age of seven, that having such a thing with my little sister and my four brothers around might be pretty impractical.

I really loved to play with my friend's doll house though, and at my friend's house. Everything seemed idyllic there. Perhaps I began comparing her life to mine, and feeling as if my life came up short.

It's hard to know what my motives were at seven. I'm pretty sure now there was jealousy. Some desire to have what I thought was my friend's idyllic life. Later, I had to lie to cover up my theft. I knew that was wrong, as well.

But I did it anyway.

It's amazing how vivid that memory is for most of us: that memory of the first time we knew something was wrong, but we did it anyway. Giving in to temptation. Most of us remember our original sin.

I remember because of how I felt about myself afterward. I was no longer innocent. I knew I was capable of telling lies and of stealing. I no longer saw myself as a 'good girl.' At that tender age, I didn't know it didn't really change who I was, it only changed how I saw myself. Of course, I couldn't share my ill-gotten treasure with anyone. I couldn't enjoy it. The only times I could even look at it was when I was alone. The act separated me from others. The act moved me into a place of darkness.

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I wish I could tell you that I had returned it, but I didn't. I was too ashamed, too afraid of being found out. So I buried it in the back yard.

That was my first awareness of temptation and I daresay we all have one.

Those first small transgressions have given away to different temptations.

We talk a lot about temptation in Lent.

From the beginning, Lent was about discipleship. On Ash Wednesday, we face our mortality with a cross of ashes on our foreheads turned toward Jerusalem, when Lent takes us to all the way to Good Friday.

Lent began as a time of forgiveness for those disciples who had not been faithful, and rigorous instruction for those who wanted to join that little band of Christians at a time when to do so could mean a death sentence. It was not taken lightly, this discipleship business.

And, in due time, no doubt because some talented educator made the connections, the texts for Jesus' forty days in the wilderness gave the season both its reference and its duration. What had been a vision quest for Jesus, was now to be a vision quest for those who seek to follow. In the earliest records of the church, this reading has been the gospel reading for the first Sunday in Lent.

And, of course, it's perfect.

If Lent is about 'the way of the cross' then these temptations remind us of the many ways we could choose that would refuse the cross. Because they lead to other ways. Ways Jesus didn't choose to follow.

Much more recently, the reading from Genesis was added. I'm sure so we could see the contrast between those who didn't resist temptation and Jesus who did.

I have to say, I don't really agree with the contrast, or the choice.

Walter Brueggemann has some observations on this morning's text from Genesis:

"No text in Genesis (or likely in the entire Bible) has been more used, interpreted, and misunderstood than this text... It has been assumed that this is a decisive text for the Bible and that it states the premise for all that follows. In fact, this is an exceedingly marginal text. No clear subsequent reference to it is made in the Old Testament... The text is commonly treated as the account of 'the fall.' Nothing could be more remote from the narrative itself. This is one story which needs to be set alongside many others in the Old Testament. In general, the Old Testament does not assume such a 'fall.' The words in Deuteronomy 30:11-14:

"Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it? Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?'" No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe."

That passage is more characteristic in its assumption that humankind can indeed obey the purposes of God."

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I just wanted to make it clear that I don't buy the original sin interpretation of this Genesis reading, nor do I buy putting all the blame on Eve!

I don't think this text helps us very much in terms of understanding Jesus' temptation. No, it's my feeling that reading from the story of Moses and the Hebrew people in the wilderness would be more appropriate.

After all, Jesus' wilderness journey takes place after his baptism, just as the Hebrews faced temptation in the wilderness after passing from slavery into freedom through the waters of the sea.

And the three temptations that Jesus faced were the same three that Israel faced in its wilderness wandering - hunger, remaining faithful to God, and idolatry.

Just as God led the Hebrews out of bondage into the wilderness with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night where they were tempted, we are told that right after Jesus baptism, when it was revealed to him that he was Beloved, that "he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil."

In the prayer Jesus taught the disciples, we pray, "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

Does God lead us into or out of temptation?

Are we to believe God is manipulative as one of my friends asked recently: "Like a parent leaving a plate of fresh-baked cookies on the table, then turning her back so that she can catch her children taking them?"

We are getting pretty close to the whole theodicy issue, aren't we – the question of where evil comes from and how a good God can allow evil to exist?

We aren't going to be able to tackle the theodicy issue in this sermon or in our lifetime, or even in this century. It is an unending wilderness all on its own.

Theologians have never solved the problem of evil and we won't either. Can we just agree that it **is** a problem? And ancient peoples used different terms to deal with it.

It does seem to me that temptation, or testing, also exists. Where it comes from, I can't be sure.

Because my father was a metallurgist, I know a little about tempering metal. Putting it through a process involving fire to make it stronger.

Temptation can have the same effect.

It seems important in terms of shaping, transforming, making stronger.

Is it such a stretch to think God would want us to be stronger?

In the Genesis story, we have Satan, who is there to tempt Adam and Eve, while no such personified being exists in the wilderness with the Israelites. For Jesus, it is the devil, or diabolos.

A friend points out that the Greek word 'diabolos' -- From which we get our English words "devil" and "diabolical" is defined first as a "traducer".

A traducer -- One who exposes another to shame or blame by means of falsehood and misrepresentation.

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Clarence Jordan suggests an unusual etymology for the same word diabolos (devil) in this passage. He says in *The Substance of Faith*: "Diabolos' comes from dia meaning 'around through' and bollo meaning 'to throw.' Our English word 'ball' comes from that. Diabolos means 'one who throws things about'—one who stirs things up—gets them confused. The work of the devil is just to get us muddled."

The parent of lies, the one who scatters them about, the slanderer, the accuser of the saints, then, is really the Great Confuser.

Perhaps there was no need for a source of confusion among the Hebrews in the wilderness. They had been in slavery so long they had lost their understanding of who they were and whose they were. They had been treated as less than human for such a long time, it had to take a toll on them.

They passed through the water, out of slavery, into the wilderness to be reformed as God's people. Transformed once again into those who would learn to live trusting in God to guide them day by day. Strong enough to hold on to their identity when faced with pressure from all around to conform to the surrounding cultures.

They were intended to be different than those cultures. A light to the nations. They had to be clear about their identity and their purpose.

Jesus truly found his identity in the waters of the Jordan. It was a moment of clarity about who God was and Jesus relationship to God. It was as plain as day, bursting from heaven for (in varying gospel versions) Jesus or all to see.

He seemed to know who he was and whose he was. But I'm not so sure he knew what that meant.

The temptations offer a radical confusion of his identity and vocation.

The confusion that Jesus suffers was not just over programs or means or methods. It is Jesus' identity and call that are being confused.

Having just heard God's voice say, "You are my child, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

He now hears: "If you are the anointed one, the chosen of Israel...."

That's a pretty powerful 'If'

That's the 'if' that stops us in our tracks. The 'if' that happens everytime we second guess our selves. When we doubt that we are also Beloved. That we, too, are called to be different than the culture – for the sake of all. That we have a purpose, a divine purpose.

I love what Bill Wylie Kellerman says:

"The insidiousness of the temptations lies in the integrity of "how" and "who." Power and person are the topic, with the one crouched ready to gobble up the other. Power may consume, corrupt, inflate, distort, dissipate, or simply deaden the person. The Confuser's scheme is for Jesus to forget who he is by getting lost in how he'll work, so that the One who is beginning and end will be swallowed up in the means.

It seems to be more and more widely recognized that each of the temptations is to power: the first to economic power, the second to military/political power, and the third to

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religious power. In all, we're granted a concise and compacted exchange on issues at once both very concrete to the life of Jesus and pertinent to our own. Remember that at the conclusion of the encounter the tempter doesn't slink off into oblivion forever defeated; he withdraws "until an opportune time." Such times present themselves repeatedly to Jesus and his followers."

If the goal is to strengthen one's identity and vocation – we are talking of boundaries and vision. Identity is about having clear boundaries – of knowing where one ends and another begins. And that can only happen if those boundaries are tested. Temptation is a necessary part of the process of figuring out who we are and what we are about. Boundaries will not be firm unless they are tested. Vision, as well, must be constantly tested to keep it in focus.

C.S. Lewis said: (and forgive Mr. Lewis for being of a certain time, when inclusive language had yet to come into being)

"No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good. A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of the German army by fighting against it, not by giving in. You find out the strength of a wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it: and Christ, because he was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means--the only complete realist."

Temptation exists. It is all around us. Confusion exists. It is there more so when both boundaries and vision are weak and untested.

I'm not so sure, when I examine it, that the point was that the Spirit led Jesus *into* temptation.

I think the important thing was that the Spirit was *with* Jesus . . . as Jesus was led into the wilderness – where Jesus would face temptation. . . . it almost sounds as if the Spirit was holding Jesus by the hand. Jesus wasn't alone, trying to 'be good'. Jesus had the Spirit with him to remind him who he was, and encourage him to continue to be that fully.

If we are honest as we begin Lent, we will wrestle with these very same temptations and even more. The constant pressure to be other than who we were created to be. The constant pressure to give ourselves up . . . to abandon the vision of the Reign of God.

We are tempted by power, by the desire and the belief that we can control things, and, we are tempted by the idea that we can get through life without suffering, and without dying. That we can follow Jesus without risking anything, without leaving anything behind, without offending anyone.

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We are tempted to believe that we must be busy, busy, busy.

We want to follow Jesus, but we resist being transformed by his life and teachings into disciples willing to follow him where he would have us go.

And, saddest of all, we face so many of our temptations thinking we are alone. Not aware of the pillars of cloud and fire there to lead us; or the warmth of the Spirit squeezing our hand; or the angels nearby to minister to us. We forget to turn to God for guidance – either in scripture or in prayer.

Kellerman again:

“TO KEEP LENT is to follow Jesus into the prayer of wilderness and garden.

To keep Lent is to confront the principalities and powers first of all in prayer. With Jesus we face the dark side of ourselves that is so susceptible to capture and control by the powers. If it happens that we vigil publicly at the gates of economic, military, political, or religious authority, we do so confessionally, acknowledging the solidarity of sin.

To keep Lent is to discover and remember who in heaven's name we are, as person and community. We pray against all confusers and confusions for our true identity and vocation. We know that means standing before the cross and making some choices.

The grace of this season is that Jesus suffers the choice with us. He's been over the turf and is our brother exactly on that score, with us in the struggle of our hearts. Let the further grace be that we make our choice as disciples, in the mind and heart of Christ.”

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