

**Genesis 3: 1-7**  
**Matthew 4: 1-11**  
**March 5, 2017**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**  
**First Sunday of Lent**

This morning we are given the two most common settings for spiritual temptation: over-abundance and utter poverty. One results in a great disaster the other in great blessing. Ironically it is the setting of over-abundance that results in the disaster. It is the utter poverty which results in the great blessing.

Yet I propose that these two settings have much in common.

In the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve live in overwhelming abundance. They have no need to work. There is no illness, no aging; every possible need is anticipated for their comfort and enjoyment. It is all provided by a loving creator who just wants them to be happy in an uncomplicated relationship with him, with each other and with the lush and beautiful garden stretching around them. Yet the creator has placed one condition upon this perfect existence—one limitation. It comes with a warning which, I imagine, meant very little to the woman and the man—that on the day they eat of the fruit of this tree they will die. No one has lived before. No one has died. What could this possibly mean?

Now before we go any further I want you to politely invite your inner theologian to go to the corner Dunkin Donuts for a cup of coffee. So much analysis and ink has been spent on this miniscule number of verses in an ancient book which has carried us far away from the simple words of the story. We have extracted great doctrines which, while they have contained elements of truth have also done great spiritual harm over the centuries. I have come to believe

that they have also from time to time seriously distorted the person and mission of Jesus. So let's leave such questions as "Why did God put a temptation in the garden? Who was guiltier—Eve or Adam? Why did God allow evil to exist in this perfect garden?" Let's just accept the story as it is presented and allow our child's curiosity to wonder.

What the story tells us is that there was something in this warning which had a profound impact on the two humans. At first they were likely unaware that they even had feelings about this strange prohibition. On hearing God's warning they did not immediately run out to look at the tree and wonder about the fruit. We might say today that the curiosity lay sleeping in their subconscious. Yet it is clear that when the reptile—I say reptile because it is clear that at this point the "serpent" has legs—raises the question of the tree, something awakens. I propose to you that if there had not already been a deep question about the tree the reptile's words would have had no effect.

What a contrast with what happens to Jesus in the wilderness! Nothing grows in the wilderness surrounding Jerusalem. There are scrubby trees and enough grass to support herds of sheep and goats. For most of the year there is no rain. Yet there are plenty of rocks and lots of sandy earth. Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit into this desolate place. And there he confronts the same voice that provoked Adam and Eve. Like the reptile this voice is reasonable and persuasive. And, like the reptile, this voice is probing. It is looking for a vulnerable place in Jesus' soul to exploit and corrupt. Matthew says that after forty days in the wilderness Jesus was famished. I wonder! After forty days without food and water most people are dead. It is a characteristic of starvation that one loses the desire to eat. We might say that one is so in need of food that one does not even know it. Maybe that is one way of understanding Jesus'

condition. Maybe this is the condition that unites Jesus with the woman and the man in the garden. They were hungry and yet did not know just how hungry they were!

Yet there is a critical difference. The woman and the man are hungry in overwhelming abundance. Jesus is hungry in a state of utter deprivation. For Eve and Adam the hunger cannot have been physical. The world was their refrigerator! The fruit they ate was not for physical nourishment. Yet it was the one thing they were told they could not have. And here is where the deep wisdom of the story begins to come forward: God warns them against eating this fruit *but he does not prevent them from eating it. He does not protect them from their desires.*

Meanwhile, in the wilderness, Jesus is physically famished yet when the devil tempts him with all the power and glory the world has to offer he resists. That is why we are human and Jesus is Jesus. We who live in abundance have a hard time believing that we should not have anything we want. We feel it is our right to have everything and everything and we feel it is an injustice that we should be denied anything. As a result we fall for the devil's lures without even thinking about it. We are blinded to the true crying need of our souls which has nothing to do with gratifying our desires or achieving great success and vast intellectual knowledge. It has to do with the great emptiness that our loving creator alone can fill with his generous grace.

This is why Jesus is so important. He shows us the true path, not just by his teaching but also by his example. He doesn't just tell us to resist the cravings of our hearts—he resists them! He shows us the way. And here is the amazing thing: when we fall and when we take the serpent's bait, Jesus comes back, picks us up and leads us back on the path. He silently reminds us that we do not have to look somewhere else for fulfillment. In his presence we have it.

Amen.