

Genesis 2: 15-17; 3: 1-7

Psalm 32

Romans 5: 12-19

St. Matthew 4: 1-11

Lent I 2023.

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“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate.” Genesis 3: 6

How often have we experienced something like this? The meal was wonderful; we were surrounded with laughter and old stories. Food and drink flowed liberally, and we're just tidying up afterwards... All the Tupperware containers are full of leftovers, and there on the counter, is the remainder of the chocolate cake. There's really just a large piece left, and some wonderful sticky icing on part of the plate. We know it's very tasty, because a short time ago, we helped devour that cake. To the person cutting, we said, “Just a small slice,” but in their generosity they gave us rather a large one, and how could we turn it down?... And then someone was pressured to have seconds, and we agreed to share a second piece (or could it even have been a third?) – to help them feel better about it, of course... And here we are, a short time later, looking at the leftover cake. Gosh! It would be criminal to throw it out, wouldn't it? There's no more room in the fridge... And there's a clean fork, right there, next to the stove. Everyone else is joking over coffee in the next room. No one will see us. We realize in our own minds at the moment that we're actually doing everyone a favour by finishing up the cake. There'll be more room on the counter, and isn't there a dinner guest who's at risk for diabetes? We don't want to put *them* in a bad position. It'll taste so good... and it's right in front of us...

That's the nature of temptation, isn't it?... It always looks good at the time... Our temptation is usually right in front of us. And it's usually private – we're either on our own, or we're with co-conspirators, like the friend who likes to gossip with us on the phone... Temptations take different forms: For some, it might be another beer when we know we've had enough. For others, it might be that click for an on-line purchase, when we know our credit card already has a high balance – but we've had a hard week, we tell ourselves!... It might be that secret resentment toward that co-worker who doesn't seem to have any problems... It might be that exchange of glances with the spouse of a friend – the one who really seems to understand us, unlike our lump of a spouse who's snoring in the Lazy-boy chair most nights. Maybe we can bump into him or her some time...

We're not alone. This is a universal human experience, this experience of temptation. The Lord Jesus himself was tempted – we'll get to that later. But let's dig into this fascinating story of Adam and Eve, which makes up our first reading today. Many people look at the stories and events in the Bible as events in the *past*, but that's missing the point. The point is, How does this biblical narrative speak into your life and my life today? Where are the gestures of God's mercy and judgement?...

Where are the signs of human faithfulness... or radical disobedience? How does this narrative speak into my life? Into my heart? (Even in the dark corners I'd rather not probe?...)

The story of Adam and Eve is the story of humanity, you see. We are all sons of Adam, and daughters of Eve... Let's look at the context of this story: God has given a wide permission, of a beautiful land for humans to enjoy in fellowship with God himself, and one another. This amazing fellowship with God and with one another cannot be overstated... God only forbids what will hurt us, either right away, or in the long run...

We also note that there is an Adversary within this world, who flails and flounders against God's good purposes. The language here is metaphorical; a picture. Satan is presented as a kind of serpent, yet with legs, who whispers lies which are attractive at the time, both to the woman, and to the man...

It's really important to note that Satan only has power in our lives when we allow it. As was explained in the sermon a couple of weeks ago, we all have free will. Let's not try to blame *others* for our problems, the way Adam and Eve did...

Temptation always looks good at the time. The whispers in Eve's ear convince her that there will be no consequences for her disobedience, and imply that God is really just a killjoy... That forbidden fruit looks – O, so good! Let's not pretend that Adam was just a sucker for his sexy naked wife. Adam knew what he was doing, and he too bit into that forbidden fruit...

So, this is the universal human problem. We're in the beginning of the season of Lent, and part of our process on this amazing journey of faith is about the solution to this problem of our radical disobedience – of the broken relationships we naturally have with our loving Creator, and with one another. So, let's move from the problem, to the solution...

In the big scheme of things, God has already won the victory. God burst into this broken world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, took on all our brokenness upon himself, died and rose to glory. As we join in this magnificent story of our redemption, one amazing, glorious day, all our brokenness will be healed for ever. We will know intimacy with the living God himself, and stunning relationships with one another, beyond our imaginations. Our final destiny (by the grace of God) is not a reverse in time to the Garden of Eden, but sweeping up the whole universe into heaven itself, that glorious state of perfect union with God. So, that's the big picture...

Meanwhile, though, we are trudging through a northern Ontario winter. We see flashes of glory, but also... we know sin all too well. We will all face times of temptation. What are we supposed to do about it?

Well, although temptation always looks good at the time, when we're being honest with ourselves, we know that if it's a true temptation, it's *never* good for us! Poison can still taste good, long before its disastrous effects are felt.

Here are some common strategies, to help us recognize and resist temptations...

First and perhaps most important, is to recognize *when* we are in the midst of a temptation. As mature people, we want to cultivate self-awareness... What are our weak spots, where we're particularly vulnerable?... For example, if shopping has developed an addictive quality for us, what is missing from our hearts and lives that we're trying to fill with *stuff*? What can we do to limit or even *end* our shopping practices, and fill the void with whatever the Spirit of Jesus wants to provide for us?... If we're lonely, might we be attracted to the wrong kind of company, and what can we do about it?... And so forth... Let's become aware of our weaknesses, and develop positive habits to address them... Even better, if we realize we're in the midst of being tempted just at that moment, it might not feel like a victory, but it is undoubtedly a victory! Let's see the big picture...

Second, let's develop our friendship with God himself, the Creator of the universe who is also our dear heavenly Father. When we get to know God's priorities – like any friendship – that's how we learn the best paths to take. That's why learning the Bible stories and precepts, and learning to apply them well, are so important for Christians. Scripture is revealing to us God's big picture, and helping us know the heart of God.

Remember that the Lord Jesus himself was tempted. These are two key ways by which *he* successfully resisted temptation: He saw temptation perfectly for what it was, and Jesus quoted from the Bible he had (what we call the Old Testament) to help him resist successfully. The Lord Jesus kept quoting from a section in early Deuteronomy. It's almost as if he had been reading or meditating on these verses...

Here is a third tool to help us live beautifully for God: To choose to be under the discipline of a group of Christians, who love us enough that we can be accountable to one another. Here are two examples: First, sometimes people approach me to get married here at St. Brice's, but they live some distance away. Maybe they have family in North Bay, or maybe there are beautiful memories about fishing here when they were growing up. Regardless, I say in reply, "I'm happy to marry you. But go get in touch with your local church. The local clergy can help prepare you for marriage, and it's in the context of that community of love that can support you and your fiancé for the adventures and challenges of married life. Belong to a community where you live, that can love you and support you – and guide you..." So, we're accountable to one another within the local parish community...

A second example of other Christians help us be accountable is a small group, such as what follows a Cursillo course. I know that putting together a Cursillo is a lot of work, and we haven't had one around here since before the pandemic. However, one of the fruits of a Cursillo is some kind of on-going loving accountability, such as having a spiritual director or belonging to a small group where the members love one another. In this small group, there must be absolute confidentiality, and to love one another enough to be able to say, "How are you doing? Really doing? What about that place of struggle?..."

If you'll forgive a personal example, many years ago at my ordination into holy orders, I took a vow that I would obey the godly admonitions of my bishop, to whom I'm spiritually accountable. As well, for decades I've had a spiritual director. Thirdly, I belong to a small group of guys at St. Brice's. Our aim is to meet weekly to share our week, to pray, and to love each other (in a cool, guys kind of way)... I'm not just choosing to attend church for my taste. I'm learning how to sit under other wise Christians, lay *and* ordained, to learn to surrender ever more deeply by the Spirit of Jesus. This is not just a model for me. In one way or another, I encourage it for us all...

Guess what? We'll all tempted! It's never good, although it can look good at the time. However, we have not been left comfortless. Here are 3 effective tools for every Christian, which are as effective as a well-oiled chain saw cutting through a sapling: See God's big picture. Know God, including scripture. Be accountable to other Christians.

We are gradually being re-made for glory. One amazing day, there will be no more temptations, just glorious life, for ever and ever.

Thanks be to God.