

This tempter knows his stuff. He’s not going to bother us when we’re fit and full. He waits till we’re tired, or stressed, or confused. So Jesus endures forty days of fasting and, toward the end, when he’s at his weakest and most vulnerable, the tempter comes. What does he focus on? Food, security, power. Those are the areas in which we are most vulnerable, most tempted to not trust God. We want to control of our food supply, our safety – we want to be in charge!

The Tempter’s his tactics haven’t changed. Now he has advertising working for him: We’re never full enough, safe enough or in control enough. And his lies work best on us when we’re in isolation. Predators on an African plain try to separate an antelope or zebra from the herd – then they can pounce and kill. There in the desert, the devil thought he had Jesus. But Jesus had him.

The Tempter we meet in Genesis – the same Tempter – tried that trick before. In a world of only two people, he managed to get the Woman alone, And he begins by distorting the word of God. “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” What God said was that Adam was free to eat of every tree in the garden, except, he said, “*But as for the tree of the knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die.*” Death was not necessarily punishment so much as an inevitable consequence of their eating, of their knowing evil as well as good.

Either way, the woman shows she knows the rule pretty well: “*We may eat of the fruit of the other trees in the garden. It is only about fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, ‘You shall not eat of it or touch it, lest you die.’*” She added the part about touching it – she’s not taking any chances. But the serpent is ahead of her. He calls God a liar. He says, “*You are not going to die, but God knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.*”

So she thinks – “Hmmm.... well it sure looks good to eat, and it sure is beautiful, and how could wisdom be a bad thing, and if God is good, wouldn't being like God be even better....” And before you know it... She takes a bite. And she gives some to her partner, and he eats it too.

And..... did they keel over and die? Not quite.

Was the serpent right – was God lying to them? Not quite.

The story says that now *“the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked.”*

And they quickly had to do something about that, they had to cover themselves. For the first time they had to be one way here and another way there, they couldn't just be their happy naked selves all the time, like little kids, happily running around after a bath ...

Not only that: They now felt shame. Now they had a double-life.

And when they heard God walking about, they hid, and they lied.

They no longer felt the confidence of being God's friends. Now they had to hide.

My friends, they had died! They had died a profound death.

The breath that animated them had not ceased, but that unity with their Creator that sustained them was suddenly gone.

Soon they would have to leave this beautiful Eden and become no longer tenders of a lush garden, where everything grew of its own accord, but farmers in a hard field where they would have to sweat for every grass to eat.

Now, instead of eternal communion with God,

they would live hard lives and then return to the dust from which they came.

No longer would they be in unity with their Creator;

No longer would they be in harmony with each other –

they would accuse and excuse and argue and yearn.

No longer would they be in harmony with their fellow creatures –

Animals would be killed to make garments to cover First Man and First Woman,

and as our story, this myth that tells a truth about us, as our story goes,

once blood was spilled, it wasn't long before one of their sons killed the other.

Is this not a loss so profound we can rightly call it death?

A death so profound that we, so long after, are still captured in it?

The tragedy was that Adam and Eve were made in God's image – they were

already like God! That was the lie of the serpent, to make them doubt that,

to make them think they had to do something else to become like God.

That has ever been the heresy of the Father of Lies,
the Distorter of all good things – to make us think there was something
we have to do, or something we can do to merit God’s love and favor,
which is freely given, which is un-earnable. We already had it.
God was pleased to make us in God’s image – in the image of One who loves,
who gives of himself, of One who creates, who names, who tends.
In attempting to “become like God” humankind lost the privilege we already had.
Suddenly our eyes were opened – and we became blind.
The perfect vision we had enjoyed became plain sight
that saw nakedness and covering, but could no longer see God.

It took the new Adam to undo that curse,
to restore our sight, our ability to see God’s realm,
to be restored to unity with God and with each other and with creation.
Many eons later another man was in a dialogue with a Tempter, now called Satan.
He was not in a garden, but in an environment as different as could be –
he was in a desert – which is what a garden becomes
when it’s deprived of moisture and care and life.
This man knew what it meant to be a steward. He was God himself,
yet he came to live among us in the form of a servant –
to save us from the mess we were in, to show us again the true image of God.

He came and offered himself to those who were in need.
He had all dominion, but he didn’t lord it over any one.
He checked in with his heavenly Father, every day, and followed his instructions
and drew on his authority when acting in his name.
And when that meant giving up his life to break the power of death
over a lost, naked and ashamed humanity, he did that.

But here we see him, early in the game, in a desert place where the Spirit
had brought him. And the Tempter comes to him and says,
“You’re not a servant! You don’t have to play by the rules!
“You can be like God – well, we both know you are God, really, so act like you are.
“You don’t have to suffer hunger – you don’t have to wait for wheat to be ground
and baked into bread – just turn these stones here into bread. Just do it!”
“You don’t have to play by the laws of gravity – you made them!
Take all the risks you want, jump off this tower – go ahead, jump!
You know God will save you, says so right in Psalm 91.

“You don’t have to wait for your reward in heaven – obey me, I can give it to you now! This is the high-speed 5G connection. Why wait?”

Wasn’t that just what the serpent promised Adam and Eve?

You can eat what you like. You can take any risk and expect to be rescued.

You can be in charge of everything right now!

They already had all they wanted to eat; they were already protected;

They were already in charge of tending this beautiful garden and its creatures.

But they didn’t trust that. They grabbed. They turned away from God.

Just as we so often do, despite our best intentions.

We are invited, in this season of Lent, to examine ourselves,

to pay close attention to the ways in which we operate out of mistrust, the places we grab for ourselves what it is God’s to give us.

In what ways are our eating or drinking or consuming harmful to us, or to others?

Where do we take risks, living like we are immortal...

and I don’t mean jumping out of airplanes. Working 80 hours a week or eating too much fried food can be unacceptable risks too.

What do we worship ahead of God? Family? Reputations? Shoes?

Where do we think we’re in charge, masters, not servants?

This is spiritual work we are called to always, but especially during this season.

We don’t do this work alone in a desert – we are invited to live in a moist, populated climate – the community of saints.

Together we can stay spiritually fit and able to thwart the lies of the tempter.

And we undertake this close look in the security of a relationship with the One who was there first, with whom we have been united in baptism.

We are able to make different choices because He lives in us.

Paul wrote,

For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

The man in that desert – He did not disobey.

In the face of the impeccable, cunning logic of his Tempter, he stood firm.

And he broke his power. Oh, the Tempter wasn’t finished – in another Gospel it says, “Satan left to come back at a more opportune time...”

And he did, again in a garden, the garden of Gethsemane,
when Jesus was tempted to avoid going through with his mission.
But right here was the beginning of the end for the Tempter.
Right here his power over human beings was checked.
And on Easter morning when Jesus rose, it was nullified, broken, forever,
so that you and I might be free forever from the death wrought by
the primal rebellion told in our sacred story.

And isn't it interesting what the risen Christ was mistaken for
by one of his disciples on that Easter morning?
She thought he was the Gardener.
Amen.

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.
He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, **command these stones to become loaves of bread.**" But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him,
"If you are the Son of God, **throw yourself down;** for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will **fall down and worship me.**"
Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,
'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Genesis 2:4b-9

(Genesis 2:15-17) The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden **to till it and keep** it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

(Genesis 2:25) And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

(Genesis 3:1-7) Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "**Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?**" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "**You will not die;** for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and **you will be like God**, knowing good and evil." 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 to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.