

Did God Really Say?

Texts: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

Romans 5:12-19

(Series A, 1 Sunday in Lent) Ps.32

Matthew 4:1-11

Prayer:

***Jesus is with us in our desert of temptation: "Away with you Satan!
... homage to the Lord God. Him alone shall you adore"***

The shortest sermon ever recorded, consisted of the preacher going into the pulpit and quoting Romans 6:23, "The wages of sin is death", and adding "there has been no change in the rate of pay. Amen".

Here we are at the First Sunday in Lent, a season of *prayer, reflection, and repentance*. The word *repent* in Biblical Hebrew is represented by two verbs: *to return* and *to feel sorrow*.

And in the post-Resurrection New Testament of Christianity, it can be defined as: *to think differently after; a change of mind and heart*. Our Forty Days of Lent, mirrors Moses' time on Mt. Sinai and Jesus' time in the Wilderness.

It is unlikely that many of us will find ourselves in an actual wilderness for these forty days, it still is a time to take ourselves away symbolically for a few minutes or more each day.

We can look for ways to simplify our wants in this temporal life, to dig down into our deepest selves to find the living Presence of God in Christ within us, to seek and experience a change in mind and heart, to feel sorrow for our sins, and to return to living as God intends.

It is far less about *giving up* something / habit / piece of chocolate or beer, and more about *taking on* a spiritual practice to discover again, or for the first time, what true *life* is all about and how to live authentically the Christian life.

Today's Gospel reminds us of Jesus' confrontation with the Devil. How many of us would be able to resist all that was offered? Am I *that* strong, do I have to be?! In the Manchester Art Gallery in England hangs a painting by Spencer Stanhope entitled, "*Eve*."

In it the serpent is whispering ideas into Eve's ear. Unseen by her, the serpent is reaching around behind and bending down the branch of the fruit tree, so that as she becomes caught up in these ideas, a bright red apple falls into her open hand

Although in the painting Eve has not yet taken a bite, nonetheless you know that she has crossed over the line. The combination of ideas playing over in her mind and the bright red apple in her open hand are just too much for her. Paradise is lost.

The deep *loneliness* and *separation* from God have begun. In a very accurate way, the artist has caught the *moment of truth* that comes with what is called "*temptation*," in your life and mine. When we say "Yes!" to God we move into *life*, into fullness of *life*, into the *life* that God intended for us.

We become the *unique* individuals we were created to be. We are given the strength to do God's will by loving other people creatively. When we say "No!" to God, we move into *estrangement* and into *loneliness* and into *disunity* and into *anxiety* and, ultimately, into *spiritual alienation and death*.

One of the values of the Temptation Story in the Book of Genesis is that you can read it over against the background of the New Testament and appreciate it in a way you never have before.

You can experience in a new way the joy, the celebration, the sense of wonder that permeates every page of the New Testament because the goodness of God comes through. Temptation at times doesn't come to us openly, because if it does, we will know it that it is leading us away from God and we will have no part of it.

But it doesn't come that way. It comes disguised as some good thing. "I'm doing this for my children, we say to ourselves. Temptation to evil comes in the guise of good. It comes faintly and, before we know it, we're trapped. The devil didn't say to Eve, "Defy God!" He started a religious discussion with her.

Temptation is, simply, the lure of the wanted, the desired. Our mortal time is filled with unlimited varieties of attractions that entice and stimulate our appetites. So, the devil whispered the idea *“Did God Really Say!”*

He led her to believe that eating the forbidden fruit was a good thing-just what God would want: God wants you to be wise. God doesn't want us to lack the knowledge that will be ours if only we will eat. Today we are told that Truth is relative, Truth is reduced to personal *interpretation, perspective, and experience* and that what you think and feels becomes the truth.

Therefore, Truth is not outside of our selves or how God defines it. So, your truth, my truth, his truth, her truth is equally right, regardless of God's definition of Truth, and by the way God's truth is only one of many truths.

Unfortunately, this is the prevailing philosophy of our day. *“Did God really say”* is taught in our Schools, Universities and Religious institutions, even preached from some pulpits.

I, for one, come from the school of thought that believes that the ultimate Truth is outside of our selves and bigger than us. The truth is how God defines in religious theme it in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament.

I believe all truths must be filtered through the canon of Scriptures. *“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* Truth must have an objective source, and that source must come outside of our selves. And I believe, that source is God. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God the Bible who incorporates all truths.

Once upon a time there was this preacher fresh from seminary and from the pulpit he would preach and say this particular passage, that passage do not apply to us in this age. One day he went to visit a member of his church in the hospital and just before he left, he saw her Bible on the night table and requested to read some passages to comfort her. To his amazement, he discovered that several pages were missing.

So, he asked why those missing pages and the parishioner answered by saying to him, pastor any time you say from the pulpit this passage or that passage is out of date and does not apply to us I tore it out the Bible. St. Francis of Assisi, once said “If we pick and chose what to believe in the Bible, it not the Bible we believe, but ourselves.”

Russel Moore a Baptist theologian says: *Temptation.....* starts with a question of *identity....* Moves to *Confusion* of the *desires.....* and ultimately heads to a *Contest of Futures*. Jesus faced temptations in three fronts:

- Lust of the flesh.... *Command these stones to become loaves of bread.*
- Lust of the eyes..... *Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*
- Pride of life..... *Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*

The *new* Adam, Jesus succeeded in all three areas, where *old* Adam and Eve failed. Jesus overcame his temptations, not through *religious debate*, or some form of will power. Jesus simply relied on the truth, and used God’s Word as the utmost truth and defense. Never underestimate the power of temptation. Never overestimate your own strength to resist it.

Lent is the perfect time to examine the temptations and distractions, the emptiness of some activity in our lives, and discover, through prayer and reflection, meditation, etc., within small groups or on one's own, how we can reinforce our ability to resist evils small and big and bigger.

The more we resist the glitter and lure of the temporary earthly delight, the less prone we will be to sliding into the cold chill of the shadows of worldliness, leaving behind the warmth and grace of God's embrace and the fortitude of Christ within us. *Jesus, ultimate Resistor of temptation, give me strength.*

We can talk about this in pulpits and in discussion groups, but it doesn't make a difference until we position ourselves for receiving God's Grace to resist temptation. Don't try to take it on by yourself. You'll lose the battle, I have lost many battles that way.

In a Ghanaian mythology there is a native bird call “Sankofa” that walks on land and flies in the air according to Akan. Meaning “To take it back.” The season of Lent gives us the opportunity to “Take back the Scriptures, take back your faith, take back your worship, take back your joy, take back your peace, take back your holiness, take back your righteousness, take back your prayer life, take back your blessings.

Before the week is over, our lives will take us past a hundred temptations. But a gracious God gives strength to *lay the bright temptation down*. Jesus is with us in our desert of temptation: The Good News is that God provides the way of escape, and gives us strength to resist the devil, and he will flee, and take back our freedom. **Amen.**

February 26, 2023