

First Sunday In Lent – Naomi Brown

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

Today's readings bring us the two most well-known stories of temptation in the Bible. In Genesis, Adam and Eve heed the words of the crafty serpent and violate God's command, while in Matthew, Jesus obeys the Spirit and spends 40 days in the desert facing and defeating temptations. Hundreds of years of Christian art and tradition make it difficult for us to see either of these stories clearly. I'm guessing most of us have heard these passages taught as warnings to be wary of Satan, a being of ultimate evil, warring against God and humanity, who attacks by twisting God's words and laying snares for the faithful.

But the texts themselves do not present anything so dramatic or cosmic. Neither Genesis nor Matthew place any sort of emphasis on the nature or identity of the tempter. Perhaps, contrary to our inherited tradition, the serpent in Genesis is not said, or even implied, to be Satan or any other spiritual being. Indeed, all the text tells us about the serpent is that it is one of the wild animals God made, albeit a crafty one. Nor does the text itself imply that Adam and Eve's disobedience plunged all future humanity into depravity and introduced evil into the world. Words like "fall" and "sin" do not appear anywhere in the text. While a broad range of theological meaning has indeed been given to this passage, the text itself gives only a story of two humans' temptation and disobedience, and the resulting consequences they face.

Likewise, in Matthew, the tempter is not depicted as a supreme force of evil, but is referred to as δίαβολος ("dee-ab-ol-os") here translated as *the devil*, but for which a literal translation would be "the adversary" or "the accuser." Matthew's author doesn't seem to find it important for the reader to know anything about this character; the focus is entirely on how Jesus responds to temptation, not on the one doing the tempting. This is not a Facebook meme of a white Jesus with a chiseled jawline arm-wrestling a buff and fiery Satan for the fate of the world. It is a man, alone in the desert, deliberately choosing obedience to God.

This perspective is important because if we read these texts as stories of cosmic spiritual warfare, we miss what they have to teach us about the temptations we face in our lives. When we think of temptation as a battle being waged against us by a powerful being, we may miss the insidious ways temptation lurks in that which is ordinary and good. As Pastor F. Dean Lueking writes, "Temptation does not limit its range to obvious evils, but invades the good creation ... the real essence of temptation attacks where humans expect the best: daily bread, sacred spaces, the devotion of the heart." When we remember that temptation lies not only in obvious evils, but perhaps even more fully in our day-to-day lives, we can become more aware of the ways we are slipping into apathy, bitterness, selfishness, and arrogance. At least in my own life, temptation rarely feels like being prodded into evil actions, but much more often comes in the form of a gentle lulling, a sense of complacency that eats away at my resolve to be loving in my relationships and overcomes my will to structure my daily life towards virtue. I am much more likely to be biting towards those I love most than to strangers, and am more apt to be neglectful of doing good in the daily moments than in grand gestures. The places where the most goodness is found in my life are the very places temptation is most likely to appear.

The temptations found in today's lessons concern not only good and holy spaces, but also good and holy desires. There is nothing sinful about desiring that which is good for food, delighting to the eyes, and has the capacity to make us wise. Nothing in the text implies it was wrong for Eve and Adam to desire this fruit or the knowledge it could bring. This is why theologian William Willimon writes that at least one "moral" of the story of Eden is that, "Even a good thing, like knowledge, in our rebellious hands, brings with it much sadness." This is one (of many) reasons why I love The Lord of the Rings. Tolkien's depiction of temptation is not of inclination towards sin and evil, but of the effect power has on us to corrupt even our best intentions—the way that power twists and warps our desire to do and be good. Throughout Lord of the Rings, the great Ring of Power tempts the hearts of upright and noble characters through their desire to do good, deceiving them that they could use the ring's power to bring about victory while being strong enough to resist its evils.

The temptations Jesus faces in today's reading also center around his desire to bring about goodness and victory. To better understand these temptations, however, we will need to lean into another Old Testament story. While there is much to be gleaned from reading Genesis 3 and Matthew 4 alongside one another, as our lectionary gives us today, the author of Matthew's gospel most likely had a different Old Testament story in mind. The setting of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness and his fasting for 40 days and 40 nights would have been immediately obvious to a Jewish audience as an allusion to Moses' 40 days on the mountain and the Israelites' 40 years of wandering in the desert. This connection is strengthened by the fact that all the scripture Jesus quotes in this story comes from Deuteronomy, chapters 6 through 8. Jesus's first rebuttal to the devil comes from Deuteronomy 8, and the preceding verses give clues to our interpretation of the gospel text. The surrounding context in Deuteronomy reads, *Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.* Humility is the key to understanding this story of Jesus' temptation.

Here Jesus is symbolically reliving the Israelites' wandering in the wilderness—being tested and made humble by God—but where his ancestors gave into temptation, Jesus overcomes. In the wilderness, Jesus has the same desires as the Israelites in the desert: the desire for material sustenance, the desire to see and know that God is on one's side, and the desire to obtain the reward God has promised. Again, all of these are good and natural desires, but the temptation in both cases was to fulfill these desires not through trust, patience, and obedience, but through expediency, self-reliance, and attempts to control God, or, to put it succinctly, through power. Moses and the Israelites fell into these temptations repeatedly during their years of wandering, but Jesus is unwavering in his obedience.

We who are familiar with the gospels know that Jesus will eventually obtain that which the devil offers to him. This passage is not about whether Jesus ought to miraculously provide food, or perform miracles, or exercise power and dominion, as we know that all of these will be a part of Jesus's ministry throughout the rest of the gospel. Rather, this is a passage about how and when these things are done and what that tells us of the character of Jesus. This text allows Matthew to

explain, right from the beginning of Christ's ministry, what sort of Messiah Jesus is, and is not, going to be. The devil tempts Jesus with what the people of his time, and even we today, would expect and desire in a religious leader. In each of these temptations, Jesus is offered an alternative pathway to accomplish his ministry, a way that offers immediacy, surety, and painlessness but at the cost of centering himself and his pride. Instead, Jesus remains obedient to the path laid before him, a path that requires patience, risk, sacrifice, and humility.

Jesus is tempted to be the kind of Messiah who turns stones into bread, to become the answer to the material needs of the people that could eliminate all need for conscientiousness, justice, and sustainability. It is the temptation to offer a way that everyone can have it all without anyone needing to share. Who wouldn't flock to a Messiah with that message? But instead, when Jesus does feed the masses, he does not command stones to become bread, but rather waits for someone to share what little they have.

Next, Jesus is tempted to be the Messiah with irrefutable evidence of being chosen by God, to leap from the temple so that all the people and the religious leaders would witness God's power and protection. But when Jesus does perform nature-defying miracles, walking on the water or calming a raging storm, it is not to prove himself to the crowds or the authorities, but to bring peace and comfort to his disciples, those who already believed and trusted in him.

And finally, Jesus is tempted to be a Messiah for whom the ends justify the means, who achieves power through diplomacy and moral compromise, to grab hold of his promised glory through worship of another god. But instead, when Jesus obtains power and glory, it is through obediently taking the path to the cross. The power this Messiah will have over the nations is subversive and strange, coming not through military might but through sacrifice and humility.

Under all of these temptations runs the common thread of pride and power. Like Adam and Eve, Jesus is tempted to become like God. For Adam and Eve, the desire to be like God, knowing good and evil, is attractive enough that they choose disobedience for the sake of power. But the first knowledge they are granted when they eat of the tree is that they are naked. The first truth they uncover is their vulnerability and fragility. The serpent promised they would become like God, and yet all they learn is how truly human they are. The response of Eve and Adam is to stitch together fig leaves to hide their nakedness, to assuage the knowledge that they are vulnerable and frail and all too human. William Willimon postulates that perhaps the creative works of humanity, from literature to music to philosophy to clothing, are all just fig leaves used to cover the reality of our mortal, human existence. We have reached out for God-like power, and have found that all it gives us is the knowledge of our weakness and a hunger for yet more power.

Like those in Tolkien's world who bear the One Ring, we both hate and love our power, knowing it is gnawing away at our life and happiness, but also unwilling or unable to give it up. Even in the small positions of power I have in my life and my work, I find myself torn between the ways my power eats me alive and the fear of what could happen if I let it go. I use all sorts of justifications to cling to my power: that I am working for good, that somebody has to do this work so it may as well be me, that people depend on me. But I know that why I really can't let go is because I am afraid that without this power, I will be seen for the weak and mortal human

being that I am. I am afraid that I will have to acknowledge what I already know deep down—that I am not like God and that I will surely die. But here in the time of Lent, we do not shy away from looking at our humanity. We acknowledge that we are dust, albeit beloved, God-breathed dust, and that after a brief span of time, to dust we shall return. In this season, we acknowledge that underneath all the temptations we face is the desire to be like God, to cling to power and pride and to deceive ourselves into believing that maybe this configuration of fig leaves will finally hide our vulnerable, mortal, humanness.

In this time, we lean on one who had every right to be like God and turn away from being human, but who instead chose the path of humble obedience. And so, let us join Christ on this Lenten journey—a journey of divesting ourselves of power, of our desire to be like God, and to instead take up the humble ministry of a prophet in the wilderness.

And may the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.