



HISSING IN THE GARDEN
Genesis 3:1-9, Matthew 4:1-11

Whenever I hear the words ‘temptation’ or ‘testing’ – my mind is immediately transported to the two scenes shared in our readings today from the word of God. If you are quiet and get real still – you can almost hear the hissing of the serpent – and the howling of the wind from the desert floor. In the eerie quietness – you can almost hear the serpent-like creature whispering to you in a seductive voice.

I can still recall at seminary when – in a Basic Theology class – a heated debate took place over the existence of evil, its origins and our human abilities to wrestle with it. One of the professors even questioned if the devil/Satan was only a myth – a creation of the human imagination. Was Satan real? It was an emotional issue with the conservatives and liberals going after each other with vigor and vinegar.

Then one of our classmates whose internship was at a drug rehabilitation center got up and said, “I have been up the past 36 hours wrestling with Satan over the control of a teenager with a heroin addiction.” An eerie silence came over the class.

Then one of the students who worked in a very wealthy, highly-educated church family around Drew Seminary shared how over the weekend – she had visited with a 50 year old white-collar executive type from the church – who had embezzled a large sum of money from the corporation he had worked for – to pay off a gambling debt. The executive shared how – over the years – his convictions and conscience had eroded. He literally felt possessed at times. An alarm had gone off – but he had become deaf and numb to it. He was hooked. Someone controlled his life – and his soul. It was not a pretty sight.

The opening chapters of the first book of the Bible are a shock to many. The Bible does not flatter us. With the creation of the first man and woman – we are not introduced to a nicer world. The world pictured is not an ideal world – the kind advertised in travel posters. Sin and suffering and injustice are not glossed over. God must work deeply – patiently – sacrificially to clean up the mess created by humanity and history.¹

From our gospel lesson we read a stirring word picture about the very Son of God – Jesus – his testing/temptation in a desert. He had laid aside his divinity – and had taken on human flesh. He is a robust young man now – about 30 years of age. He is driven out by the Spirit – after his baptism - to a desolate desert. Many things

have happened to his ancestors in the desert. He is alone. For 40 days he is there – day after day – night after night. He feels the blistering heat by day – the bone-chilling air at night. He is fasting alone in the wilderness. He is hungry and thirsty. Only enough food/water for survival. The one who helped to create the oceans – and the life-giving plants and fruits – is thirsty and hungry. You can almost see him sitting on a boulder – reflecting and praying. What verdict will the wilderness experience draw out of the Son of God – Jesus?

Yes, the Bible resounds with a crystal clear message to us today. There is a power at work in our world whose mission is **not** of God's design or desire. You may call it what you wish – but it is very real. Read a newspaper or magazine, watch my favorite soap opera "All My Children" or "Law and Order" and you will never debate if it really exists.

Evil is a topic that American culture has avoided for far too long. As C. S. Lewis reminds us, "The first policy of the devil is to persuade us there is no devil." Evil is not something that can be fixed by a government program. Sometimes the government can be the problem. There is no pill to take or shot to be given. There is no dialysis machine to wash evil out of the blood of humankind. It resides in every heart and mind. We need to be taught about evil as early as we begin to walk and chew.²

Lent is the season for honesty about our world and ourselves. Years ago – G. K. Chesterton was asked by a British newspaper to contribute an essay on the subject "What is wrong with the world." Chesterton sent back a one-word answer. "**Me!**"³

Today we will speak of the wilderness not only as a geographical location – but as a region of the human spirit and dimension of human experience.⁴

For me, the soul represents the deepest longing – the most valuable part of our existence. Its roots must be deep and not shallow – or we could find ourselves handing over our lives to someone else, but God. Testing – not talking – demonstrates what is inside of us. How deep is our connection? Can we live out the demanding life of discipleship that Jesus expects from us as the called out people of God?

The devil is fully aware who Jesus is. He has just been baptized in the river Jordan. In the New Testament the powers of evil recognize the identity of Jesus Christ long before the disciples ever got it right. The question is 'Can Satan seduce the second Adam as he did the first one?' After all Satan is crafty and the 'Father of all lies.'

There are three temptations that come to Jesus. Let us look at them.

THE FIRST TEMPTATION IS TO TURN A STONE INTO A LOAF OF BREAD.

Satan says, "If you are the Son of God" He tries to cleverly maneuver Jesus into a response. In a world where 20% of the human race goes to bed hungry – and 42% of the children of a local school district live below the poverty level – this is a tempting offer. The temptation is to bypass God in order to do something good.⁵

As Eugene Peterson reminds us “bread – necessary as it is – is not primary. God is the priority. Jesus will let nothing – not even necessary things – interfere with this fundamental priority. Jesus will not use God to get what he wants – but submits himself to being what God wants. Jesus knew his mission was to lead us to acquire new appetites – a hunger for righteousness.”⁶

An alarm goes off for Jesus – a warning – a red flag so to speak. The offer grabs his attention – because of his conscience and orientation to life.

In **John 4:34**, “my food,” said Jesus “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.” Jesus knew the deepest hunger – beneath all other hungers was our hunger for God. Jesus will not respond by the devil’s standard – but by God’s. In God’s word – the Book of Deuteronomy – it clearly reveals “Man does not live by bread alone.” This is not an escape from our concern for social justice – but really centering all our work in God’s purpose – and not anyone else’s.

THE SECOND TEST FOR JESUS IS TO ACQUIRE AND USE POWER AND AUTHORITY FOR HIS OWN PURPOSES.

Jesus knew what worship was really all about. It is to ascribe worth and honor and dominion. Power – as appealing as it is – is not primary – God is. Jesus will not negotiate for power with the Evil one – even though he could use it benevolently. An alarm goes off again. Love and honor must not be coerced. It must come from a heart set free.

Jesus will not use God as a means of showing off or attracting admirers.⁷ Jesus will be calling and training disciples for the tough work of salvation and love – discipleship. It will involve holiness of heart, self-denial, suffering – but not entertainment.

My friends, heart work is hard work. We must invite God into every chamber of our heart. This work requires the word of God to go deep. Remember, there’s far more inside a person than there is outside. This requires much training and discipline. This is about life formation and inward transformation. Jesus spent 30 years of his life preparing for these 3 years of ministry. He was always at the synagogue and Temple. He was always about his Father’s business.

Satan tries to out-manuever Jesus by quoting from sacred scripture himself. While Satan can quote and read from the word of God – Jesus actually submits himself to the authority of the word. There is a big difference.

Jesus knew the power worth submitting to and falling down to worship was the power of God – which spoke the world into being and was redeeming it. Jesus once again answered from **Deuteronomy 6:13** “Worship the Lord your God and serve him only!” Not much is acquired in discipleship with discipline.

THE THIRD TEST OF JESUS IS TO LIVE LIFE BY POPULARITY POLLS RATHER THAN PURPOSE OF GOD.

My mentor, Eugene Peterson, reminds us “Miracles – attractive as they are – are not primary – God is. Jesus will not use God as a means of showing off – or attracting admirers. Jesus will not engage in miracle-making that dazzles or entertains.”⁸ Jesus is about calling disciples – not admirers. John Lennon once remarked at the height of the success of the Beatles that they were ‘more popular than Jesus.’ Jesus was never about popularity. His words and call go much deeper than that.

John Lennon and the Beatles have faded away – a mere footnote in the pages of history – the name of Jesus lives and towers over all names.

As the offer comes to Jesus – once again an alarm goes off. Once again Jesus will not put God to the test. As Adam and Eve failed in the garden – and the nation of Israel in the wilderness and desert – Jesus emerges victorious.

The value of testing is to reveal what you have centered your life around and whose voice you are paying attention to. Jesus was centered and committed to the voice of the eternal. All other voices set off an alarm that empowered him to say, **“No.”** Jesus was faithful to his identity and calling as God’s son. Jesus’ mission was to undo what went wrong in the garden. He refused any offer that was not God’s offer – even if it included a cross. Only the cross can lead us back home to God.

Lent is the season to take spiritual inventory and ask the hard questions. You change your center – exchange your wisdom for his. If you need wisdom and discernment – ask for it.

Lent can teach us to turn away from our wants – and instead focus ourselves on our truest needs. To give us strength and encouragement for the journey – the bread and cup are in front of us today. Here we see and taste bread that not only satisfies the stomach – but touches the soul as well. Here we see power in its purest form – the power to love. Here we see the power of the One who simply delighted himself in God’s purpose – and 21 centuries later – nothing has diminished that commitment. He still issues the invitation, “Follow me.” Let us join the everlasting song and crown him Lord of all.

Come, sinners, to the gospel feast!

Amen and amen.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with Its Translator**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 17.

² Thanks to my colleague Arthur J. Landwehr for this insight.

³ William H. Willimon, "**Pulpit Resource**," Jan.-March, 2009, page 52.

⁴ R. Maurice Boyd, **PERMIT ME VOYAGE**,

⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with its Translator**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1489.

⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, **PRAYING WITH JESUS**, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, N. Y., 1993, January 29 devotion.

⁷ Ibid, Peterson, **PRAYING WITH JESUS**, January 25th devotion.

⁸ Ibid, Peterson, January 28th devotion.