

## SCRIPTURE

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

<sup>15</sup> The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. <sup>16</sup> And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; <sup>17</sup> 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.'

### Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

<sup>3</sup> The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' <sup>4</sup> But he answered, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."' "

<sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup> 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."' "

<sup>7</sup> Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."' "

<sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; <sup>9</sup> and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."' "

<sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

## MESSAGE

This morning we've heard two temptation stories. Adam and Eve faced temptation in the garden, and later Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. The first story didn't end so well; the second, however, is both inspiring and instructional. Both of them are revelatory; we learn something of who we are, and something of who we are meant to be.

The story of Adam and Eve is a descriptive tale of what humankind is like – and it's not complementary one at all. The first parents were born into a paradise; God gave them life, gave them breath, gave them freedom and autonomy, saying 'Get out there - explore and enjoy. All this is yours. Bless it, take care of it and it will take care of you. But stay away from the tree in the middle. That will only bring you grief and ruin.'

The bible doesn't tell us how long these two lived in Eden before they started eying the tree of knowledge. All we know is that at some point they started paying too much attention to it. Wondering, wanting, wishing.

The conversation with the serpent indicates that eating of the tree was no accident. There was some back and forth; some thinking, reasoning, negotiating – maybe for days – years even.

But eventually, both Eve and Adam ate of the tree. They succumbed to temptation. They did what they knew was harmful to themselves and forbidden by God. And ever since, sin has been present in our world.

I know some of you want to ask – why put the tree there in the first place? Why would a good God try to tempt and trick his beloved creation?

The simple answer is freedom – self determination. God created us in his image, which means we are conscious beings, able to think, make decisions, and act in a creative manner. But, autonomy is an all or nothing deal – if we are free to make decisions, then we also have the freedom to make bad decisions. As much as we want to keep our kids from making poor choices, we know that if we interfere too much we doom them to eternal adolescence; they will not grow into functioning adults if we continually restrict their decision making opportunities.

So the tree was a choice – nothing more. It represented God saying to his people 'I have equipped you enough that I don't need to smother you. You can make choices – if you choose well, life will go pretty smoothly. If you choose poorly, things are going to get difficult.'

So, after an indeterminate amount of time, the first people made their first poor choice. And the consequences were severe; though to be fair to God, the consequences were no more severe than God already warned. They were told up front that by eating of the tree they would introduce death into their world, and that is what happened. Death in the form of alienation from God, decay, disharmony, distrust, dislocation, disruption of healthy life patterns, physical decay and ultimately death of the body.

And that's where we've been ever since. We continue to live in a world that supports us in every way; though we have to toil for our sustenance, everything we need is provided for us. It's all right here.

Yet we continue to make bad choices. We continue to do things that we know are harmful to ourselves and others. I know I do. And we do it consciously. Knowing full well the consequences we waste, we pollute, we poison ourselves with drugs and drink, we hoard, we build walls and fences – there is no end to the list of ways in which we intentionally choose what is bad.

So what is the deal with us? If we know what is wrong but do it anyway, are we just bad people? Is there a fundamental flaw in us that predisposes us to sin? Can we blame our predicament on God?

I'm not sure that we can. It comes back to that freedom principle again. If God removes all opportunity for us to do evil, then he also removes all opportunity to do good. We would be no more than mindless insects, dumbly reacting to our environment. And what would be the point of that?

If there is no possibility of choosing good, choosing life, choosing love, then however beautiful, intricate, and complex creation is, there would be no goodness, and thus no purpose for God to create it. So, it seems as though for the time being we are stuck with creation as an arena in which good and evil exist, a creation in which our choices actually make a great deal of difference. The question is 'can our choices make a *good* deal of difference?'

This is where we turn to our gospel lesson – Jesus in the wilderness.

Jesus was tempted. Just as we are. Maybe not just as we are – I've never done a forty day fast in the desert – but he was tempted with the same things that tempt us.

The first temptation was food. Food represents our bodily needs and physical comfort – the desires of the flesh. The tempter cajoled Jesus 'Turn these stones into bread.' After forty days of not eating I imagine all those stones looked like loaves to Jesus.

But Jesus responded 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'

The second temptation, jumping from the pinnacle of the temple to be caught by angels, is a temptation to a careless life – that no matter what we do God will somehow save us from inevitable consequences of our actions because of our great faith. There are hints of the prosperity gospel heresy in this temptation – that as long as we have faith and pray hard, nothing bad will ever happen to us. We will be healthy, wealthy, and wise, with perfect children and perfect teeth.

Jesus replied saying 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'

The third temptation has to do with pride. The tempter offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world along with all the power and adulation that would be accorded to such a supreme leader, as long as Jesus would bow down to him.

Jesus' response was 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'

Of these temptations, of body, soul, and spirit, Jesus resisted by quoting scripture – the word of God. This lets us know that the answers to life's challenges can be found in the pages of the

good book. The bible can inform any challenges that we might face and is able to give us direction.

What this means is that while we may claim ignorance – rarely is this a valid excuse. Regardless of our protestations, it is very rare that we do something evil without intention. We know when we're doing wrong. Even if we don't know the bible well, something within our spirit raises a fuss when we cross a line.

But that voice can be ignored, so a familiarity with the word of God can help us. Notice that Jesus was alone in the desert – not in a library – he didn't have his phone with Google on it. There was no opportunity to comb through dozens of scrolls to find just the right rejoinder to silence Satan. Jesus had to know God's word – have it just on the tip of his tongue.

This doesn't mean that we spend hours every day memorizing huge tracts of the bible, but it does mean that if we spend fifteen minutes every day reading, over a period of years we will have built up storehouses of knowledge. These are the emergency reserves that we draw upon in times of need. Get familiar with your bibles – don't think that what I tell you on a Sunday morning is enough. I'm only here to stimulate further thought and discussion – my limited knowledge and limited time will not give you the comprehensive understanding that you need. I'm a provoker and encourager – nothing more.

So, Jesus demonstrates that knowledge of scripture can arm us with the knowledge of what is right and wrong. Is that the end? It seemed to work pretty well for the Son of God to merely quote scripture then turn his back on temptation. Is that how it works for us?

I wish I could say so, but just as Adam and Eve sinned with full knowledge of what they were doing, so it is with us as well. Scripture will help us to know right and wrong, but still it is on us which we choose. And we often choose wrongly.

We just have to look around to see that this is clearly the case. Environmental degradation, protestors and blockades, striking teachers, Alberta talking about succession. The amount of strife and discord in our culture is an undeniable indication that wrong choices are being made. Please note, I'm not saying who is making the wrong choices – all of the current conflicts in the news now are very complicated, and have a long history – I'm not sufficiently involved or informed enough to pass any kind of judgement. But the presence of these conflicts is itself indicative that temptations are being succumbed to by some people; temptations of expedience, comfort, greed, and power.

So, given the prevalence of temptation and the surety that at some point we will give in to it, what's the point? Because we know for sure that we will fail. 'There is no-one righteous,' Paul writes, 'Not even one.' Once we break God's law, is there any coming back?

This is a very appropriate question in our time. Is there such thing as redemption? Our current social climate has a name – a moniker. We live in a cancel culture. Granted, this is something

that is much more pronounced in larger urban centres, especially university cities – and is embraced more by younger, technologically connected folks. But its effects are being felt across the western world right now.

In a nutshell, cancel culture means that once somebody has transgressed social norms, they are boycotted – essentially cancelled as a person. This means that if you say or do something socially unacceptable you are not simply punished for the act, you get reviled as a person and everything connected with you is tainted, and therefor avoided.

The most recent example is Jean Vanier, one of the cofounders of L'Arche – a non-profit organization that seeks to help intellectually challenged folks. It has been revealed that Mr. Vanier was involved in what are described as coercive relationships with various women.

I don't know what that means exactly, but I do know that it's serious enough that L'Arche conducted an investigation and has come forward publicly with their findings. It's not something to be dismissed or swept under the rug.

Clearly, Jean Vanier faced temptation, and he gave in. As with Cain, sin was prowling at his door and he let it have it's way. He engaged in behaviour that was harmful to a number of women, and also harmful to the organization that he was so integral to.

So what now? Public condemnation has been swift – as it should be. But the condemnation has also been total. Within hours of the announcement call were being made for schools to be renamed, and statues removed. All mention of Vanier's name that had a positive context were to be excised.

This is where we are as a culture, and it disturbs me. When we find fault with someone they are crucified, and there is no coming back. I'm not saying that we gloss over Vanier's crimes – not at all. But I question our unthinking, reactionary rush to immolate all that was good in the name of condemning something evil. There is no such thing as redemption in cancel culture. Once your terrible truth is revealed your life, your career, your reputation is permanently demolished.

This should disturb all of us, because each one of us has something horrible that we have done. Something that we pray nobody ever finds out about. Every one of us has succumbed to temptation – temptations of the body, of the soul, and of the spirit. Every one of us is an Eve; every one of us is an Adam.

Now the good news. That same Jesus who showed us that it is indeed possible to resist temptation using the word of God, also provides us a path to redemption when we fail. God will not let our failure have the last word. He will not let all that is good be wiped out by evil.

Think about it. If we are forever condemned by sin, and we all inevitably sin, then evil wins. A thousand good deeds are cancelled by a single selfish act. Is evil more powerful than good? Does hate hold more sway than love? I think not.

Fortunately for all of us, God also believes that evil does not trump good; that we can be saved, that what is good can be redeemed.

Repentance, and forgiveness. That is how it works. We recognize sin, turn away from it, make reparations where we can, and we start again. Unrepented sin festers and feeds the accuser. It infects us, makes us weak; more liable to succumb to future temptation.

To return to Vanier for a moment – I'm not saying that we need to forgive him. That's not our job, it has nothing to do with us. That's up to the people involved and God. Not us. Instead of piling on with our own condemnation or opinions the best thing we can do is let them have their voice.

What we do have some control over though, is ourselves. Out of the two temptation stories this morning one reveals the nature of humanity, the other reveals the nature of the Divine. Fortunately for us, we have a little of both inside.

So while Adam showed us how to err; Jesus shows us a new way – a better way. Jesus resisted the devil using scripture. We can do that. Maybe not all of us right now, but if we read our bibles half as much as Facebook then in not too long we would find ourselves quoting chapter and verse. The universe was created with God's word – God's word is also the weapon of the resistance.

We have the sword that is the word of God as our weapon, and we have grace as our defense. As long as Adam and Eve hid their sins within, they were naked and exposed – the accuser would always have a foothold in them. They were vulnerable.

Jesus has taken that away. The cross is God's declaration of forgiveness. God has declared our si\*ns, not null and void, they aren't gone, but they don't necessarily condemn us. The accuser can no longer use that weak spot in our armour to destroy all that is good and godly, and so we are empowered to resist; we fight with no fear and with God on our side.

God has given us choice, and because we have choice we are empowered and enabled. We are a kingdom of free human beings filled with the word and spirit to fearlessly challenge the powers and institutions of this world that cause suffering and injustice; we are human beings who do not fear the devil because we cannot be deceived. We are clear in the word of God, secure in our redemption. We are Adam and Eve 2.0 – we are not sinless, but we are free from sin.

We leave this service today empowered by the word of God, and fed by the body of Christ to be the body of Christ in the world. Live in peace with God, and with one another.