

Temptation and Trust, Genesis 2:15-17. 3:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11

Pastor Judy Bangsund

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When I looked at the lessons for today, my first thought was, “Oh great! How come *I’m* the one who has to preach on temptation?” Not an especially popular topic, and not one I normally choose to dwell on. It reminds me of when I was asked to do a “chapel” for our three-year-olds in pre-school some years ago. The topic assigned to me by the teachers was The Fall into Sin. “Really?” I thought. “How do you teach 3-year-olds about The Fall?” So I decided I’d focus on forgiveness. But of course, to get to forgiveness, you need to begin with sin.

So, after we got settled and kind of made friends, I began with the question, “Have you ever done anything wrong?” And instantly I had their attention. Their eyes widened and they looked at me as if asking themselves, “How did she know?” And then, almost as a unit, they all shook their heads. *Uh-uh. Not me. No sir. I’ve never done anything wrong.*

Three years old! We all face temptation, from the oldest to the youngest. It’s a life-long problem, so we have to take it seriously. Two of our lessons today bring us a powerful contrast, first from Adam and Eve, and then from Jesus. Let’s take a look.

In Genesis, we have a picture of brand-new humanity: Adam and Eve. They have experienced all of God’s good creation and a relationship of trust with him. God has, however, given them one rule: not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Enter the snake. He is an expression of Satan, of course, and is described as being crafty and subtle. He doesn’t confront or threaten them; he simply introduces doubt. “Did God say...” he asks innocently. “Oh my goodness. But you know, God really doesn’t mean it. You will not ‘surely die.’ In fact, you will become more like God, knowing good and evil.” Satan is The Great Deceiver. He tells half-truths and outright lies. He sneaks up on you when your defenses are low and tempts you to do what you know is wrong. Or to sit back and refrain from doing what you know is right. But the poison on the arrow is this: he tempts you to doubt God.

Now, it may surprise you to hear that Christianity has no organized doctrine about Satan. We have doctrines about God, the Trinity, Christ, salvation, the Holy Spirit. There are official church teachings about all these things. But there is no “satanology.” Professor Walter Sundberg of Luther Seminary says that what we do have is a collection of loosely-formed teachings, with Satan appearing in different disguises. A snake, for example, in Genesis. A dragon in Revelation. A prosecuting attorney in Job. While the expression of this evil force varies, the Bible does witness to a malevolent personality, bent on destruction. His special power, you might say, is to undo God’s good work.

Now, I want to be clear. As Christians, we do believe in the existence of this malevolent personality, but we don't believe in him in the same way that we believe in God. We believe and *trust* in God. We acknowledge the reality of Satan, and need to be aware of the way he works. Both God and Satan are real, but God wants to be believed in, trusted, loved. He wants a relationship with you. Satan, on the other hand, wants to be denied, would rather you were unaware of him and his ways, to better accomplish his sneaky and destructive goals. Relationship is the last thing on his mind; deception is the first. (Check out C. S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters* for more.)

So let's turn to the other story for today, when Satan encounters the Son of God himself. This was the Big Prize in the flesh. If Satan could conquer Jesus, the battle was won. The victory over the world – indeed over God himself – would be his. Notice that he strikes when his victim is most vulnerable. Jesus is hungry, close to starvation. And Jesus, just prior to coming to the desert, had heard his Father's voice at the moment of his baptism saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Now in the desert, Satan begins by casting doubt, just as he did in the Garden: "If you are the Son of God... prove it! Hungry? Use your power to turn stones to bread. Wondering about your Father's love and protection? Test him by throwing yourself down from the temple. Do you need power, Jesus? I can give that to you! Just worship me, and it's all yours for the taking."

But unlike Adam and Eve, Jesus was not fooled by Satan's clever tricks. He trusted his Father, not the words of this deceiver. Jesus wanted nothing to do with him, and used Scripture as his sword and shield. Food is a good thing; but God's word satisfies more. God's love and protection? Jesus didn't need to test that. He trusted his Father's love. Power? Well yes, but Jesus was seeking power of a different kind. What the devil had to offer sounded good; but would not satisfy.

My friends, temptation comes to all people. Even Jesus was tempted. It's not a sin to be tempted; it's what happens next. Sin is dangerous. It can spiral out of control. Our difficulty is what we do with temptation. How do we handle this ever-present, relentless problem?

Well, there are some things we can do, and some things we can't. Luther used to say in regard to temptation, "You cannot keep birds from flying around your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair." We just read Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, in which he said that with every temptation God gives you a way to escape (1 Cor 10:13). So here are some things you can do. Think in terms of *fight, flight and fill*:

Fight. Do what Jesus did: let Scripture be your sword and your shield. Learn it; study it; memorize it. Quote it when you can. My parents taught us this one when we were little: "Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I may not sin against thee." Songs based on Scripture are powerful and easy to remember; listen to them, sing along, sing them together with others, in

the car and at Christian gatherings. God uses his Word and speaks through it in many ways. Hide it in your heart.

Flight. When you are tempted, don't just sit there and flirt with it. Don't play with tempting ideas and thoughts, thinking this is innocent. It is not. There should be red flags popping up; pay attention to them. Scripture says, "Flee temptation." Instead of flirting with it, turn around and run! Get out of the situation. Just leave quietly, whether mentally or physically. Turn your attention to other things.

Which brings us to a third solution: *Fill.* Fill up your mind with good things. Paul writes in Philippians 4:

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Philippians 4:8-9

So what is beautiful to you? Creation? Mountains, trees, the beach? What is something or someone you admire? Learn more about that. Do you have a favorite hobby? Maybe it's music or photography. Find something productive and interesting and good, and pursue that. I once heard a speaker tell his audience, "Your mind is a warehouse. Everything you put in it will be stored there. So don't store junk. Violence, seductive images, worthless pursuits – don't even think about these things. Rather, store good things, things that you would never be ashamed to share with someone else." Fill your warehouse with things that are honorable, true, and beautiful. (*Fight, flight and fill.*)

When those birds of temptation start flying around your head – there are some things you can do to keep them from building nests in your hair. So do them! But you and I also know that there is only so much you can do. We *are* sinful creatures. We are prone to wander; prone to leave the God we love, as the old hymn says. There are some things, finally, that only God can do.

And that brings us back to Jesus. Jesus withstood temptation – every time. He would not be drawn into the devil's subtle tricks, and Luke tells us that when Satan had finished tempting Jesus in the desert, he "withdrew until an opportune time." And of course, that arrived in the Garden of Gethsemane. The thought of avoiding the cross was Jesus' ultimate temptation. (We'll hear more about that in Holy Week.)

My friends, Jesus is the Son of God. He alone can rescue us from temptations that lead to sin and all its many consequences. On our own, we will inevitably fail, as Adam and Eve did. But here's the good news: Jesus has power over the Tempter, and he will win in the end.

We believe Satan is real. But he is not equal with God. We do not have two equal adversaries here. There is not a good God and a bad one; from the get-go the serpent is described as a creature, not as divine. Satan is powerful – the Bible calls him the prince of this age – but his power is limited. God is God and there is no other. And in order to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, God entered our world in the flesh, in the person of Jesus. He did that for one reason: to fight and win the final battle with the prince of this age. And he did that on the cross, using Satan's own tools of cruelty and death, turning them around, nailing the victory. In Christ forgiveness, love and life now rule in our lives.

Because of Christ, when you acknowledge your sin; when you are sorry for what you have done, you open the door to God's forgiveness. He forgives you, washes you clean, transforms you into Christ-likeness and makes you his own. He is seeking you now, for a relationship that is like the one Adam and Eve first enjoyed in the Garden, when God would meet with them every evening to take stroll and share a conversation. Today he meets you in prayer, in song, in his Word, at His table. And then he sends you out in his great and mighty power, to love and to forgive the next guy. Until Jesus comes again.

Temptation is hard, but there are ways to deal with it. Satan is real, but we don't believe in him as we believe and trust in God. Finally, it all boils down to trust. So do you trust God? Do you believe his promises? Are you in a relationship with Christ? Jesus has won the battle and now you belong to him. Trust him. Give your life to him. He gave his life for you.