

Message for the first Sunday of Lent, March 5, 2017

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

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Scripture passages: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11

We hunger

There was trouble even in paradise. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil grew there along with all the other trees. It was part of the package. God knew this. God knew that the fruit of that tree was there for the taking. And God knew what the knowledge of evil was all about. “Don’t go there,” God says to the innocent human beings. “Don’t eat that fruit. If you do, you’ll regret it. If you do, you will die.”

But we humans are curious people, hungry people, people who are always looking for something more. This is not a bad thing – God made us this way. It is the creative impulse. But it can so easily get misdirected. Instead of trusting God’s benevolence and entering fully into God’s steadfast, life-giving love, we look elsewhere. We listen to the crafty voice of the serpent. We hear his siren song. It drowns out God’s voice. We do not heed the warning. Instead, like our ancestor, Eve, we take and eat the apple. Instead of choosing life in God, we choose to open Pandora’s box.

This is the human condition. The Old Testament is great at describing who we are as human beings. The New Testament – in particular, the stories and teachings of Jesus – offers a different perspective on what it means to be human. Hunger, desire, temptation come to everyone, including Jesus. So, how did Jesus deal with it? What did he do when the crafty serpent came around making offers he could hardly refuse?

This past week as I thought about Jesus – hungry, weak, alone, and facing temptations in the wilderness – I came across a wonderful reflection on this passage from Matthew. It was written by Nura Love Parish, an Episcopal priest from Belmont,

Michigan, and appeared in the February 15 issue of Christian Century magazine. I want to share her words, her story, with you. Nura Love Parish writes:

I remember the first time I stumbled across the story of Jesus being tempted by the devil. It was in my early twenties, when I was not yet a Christian but I was Christian-curious. I hadn't been raised by or among Christians, but I had recently discovered religion as a Unitarian Universalist. Now that I understood a little bit about faith, I wondered about Christianity.

I wanted to understand how Christians made sense of their strange doctrines. The creator of the universe was born as a human, by a virgin? That human was killed but did not stay dead? These statements baffled me, yet appeared to be acceptable to a majority of the world's population. Were they using some system of internal logic I could comprehend, even if I might not agree?

I hadn't read the Bible much at all. But I had discovered *Weavings*, a magazine published by Upper Room Ministries. I didn't know much about Christianity, but I knew something about good writing and good illustrations. *Weavings* had both. It was created by those mysterious beings, Christians. I realized that reading it might help me in my quest to understand them. So it was that I found myself reading an essay by Wendy Wright on temptation.

She began with the story of Jesus in the desert. Like so much of Christianity, it was confusing. Who was this devil? What was Jesus doing talking to him in the desert? Did people really believe this stuff?

And then I read this sentence: "The tradition teaches that these temptations stand

for pride, power, and possession.” And all of a sudden my soul – not my mind, but my soul – said “Aha!” as a puzzle piece clicked into place.

I didn’t know much about Jesus, the devil, or that desert, but I knew pride. I knew the desire for power; I knew the wish for possessions. I was familiar with all of them, from painful experience.

All of a sudden the story wasn’t just about Jesus; it was about me, too. And not just me: It was about all humanity. I know from the history books and the newspapers that we all struggle with pride, power and possessions. People and nations fight, kill, and die over who is worthy of respect, who gets control, and who owns what. The more I thought about it, the more these three simple words seemed to be at the heart of the human experience. It began to make complete sense that these were the temptations the devil offered Jesus. They were the same temptations that the devil still offered me.

I began by recognizing myself in the temptations, but I soon realized that I was meant to also recognize myself in the responses that Jesus makes in return. When tempted to put himself first, he puts God first. He puts spiritual nourishment above bodily nourishment, trust in God above testing God, faithfulness to God above wealth. He places his relationship with the eternal above all – far above the temptations the devil offers. He does all this without a single second’s thought, in total unity with God the Father.

It has been 20 years since I found that *Weavings* essay. I’ve racked up one baptism, one marriage, and two ordinations (UU and then Episcopalian). But I still haven’t figured out how to do naturally what Jesus did immediately. I still get swayed by pride, power and possessions – each and every day.

The difference between my life now and 20 years ago is this: I have been baptized into the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And so I have already died to my mortal being and been raised with Christ. Because of his saving action on the cross, I don't need to be afraid when I succumb to temptation. I can simply begin again. During Lent, and any time.

When you fall into sin, we ask at baptism, will you repent and return to the Lord?

I will, goes the reply, with God's help.

I need God's help every single day.

But every single day since I was baptized, I have read myself more and more into the story of the Bible. I have discovered how it actually makes sense that God was born in human flesh, that he was killed but would not stay dead. The facts of incarnation and resurrection have become visible in my life – just as the temptation story once did. It turns out the story does hang together with an internal logic. Twenty years ago when I encountered it, that internal logic was wiser than I was. I could not make sense of scripture then. Now it helps me make sense of me.

[end of the words by Nura Love Parish]

When Adam and Eve – those fateful ancestors who represent all of us – were faced with a choice – trust God or listen to the serpent – they decided to second-guess God. Yes, they had it good, but what the serpent had to offer sounded even better. Perhaps for some perverse reason God was holding out on them. After all, look what was being promised: They would know everything. They could turn stones into bread, jump safely off cliffs and rule the world. They could be like God. What's not to like? So,

they went with the serpent. “Then their eyes were opened,” it says in Genesis. “They knew that they were naked.” They knew, to their distress, that the serpent’s promises were empty and that instead of being wrapped in and protected by God’s love, they were alone and on their own.

When he is faced with similar temptations in the wilderness, Jesus makes a different choice. Listen again to how Nura Love Parish describes it: “When tempted to put himself first, Jesus puts God first. He puts spiritual nourishment above bodily nourishment, trust in God above testing God, faithfulness to God above wealth. He places his relationship with the eternal above all – far above the temptations the devil offers.” And he is not alone. God is with him – holding him, supporting him, providing for him – every step of the way.

We long for this relationship with the eternal. We are thirsty for this living water. We are hungry for this bread of life. Sometimes this longing gets misdirected and we follow the crafty serpent down the garden path after pride, power and possessions. Then our eyes are opened and we find ourselves bereft and alone. Happily, there is always a way back. A way back into this relationship for which we are made. A way back into the safety and stability of God’s steadfast love.

This morning we will share Communion – the bread of life, the cup of blessing. As we do this, we remember the lengths God was willing to go to convince us that we are deeply and completely loved. We have a relationship with the eternal. There is nothing out there more precious than this, nothing worth selling our soul for. With God, in God, we truly have all that we need.

Please turn to page #29 in the green Sing the Journey songbooks. This is our

Lenten theme song: “You are all we have.” In a minute Frank will come to lead us in singing this song. But first, let’s take a moment to listen to, absorb and pray the words:

Dear God, You are all we have. You give us what we need. Our lives are in your hands, O Lord, our lives are in your hands. Amen.