

Sermon for Sunday, March 5, 2017

THE TEST

Our Lenten journey begins in failure, in human failure, in the failure of Adam and Eve, God's first children, to obey God's commands. By the time this descriptive narrative comes to a close, we know two things: creation is good, and we are bad. Humankind messed up right from the get go, and our disobedience is the beginning of "the rest of the story," the saga of salvation history.

You have to feel badly for Adam and Eve. Created innocent as doves, God sets them up for a fall when God commands, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, but one, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The day you eat of that one you will die." And what makes the story work is that we all know how pathetic we are when it comes to resisting forbidden fruit. Tell us what we can do and all will be fine, but tell us what we can't do, and we'll find a way to do the forbidden thing every time. So when Eve sees that the tree is good for food, and that it is a delight to the eyes, and that it will make her wise, she doesn't stand a chance, and Adam either. They eat, and the rest is history.

The curse of The Fall, beyond being kicked out of the Garden, and starting the garment industry, is self-awareness. Adam and Eve did not die from the fruit, but they became aware that they would die, and that was worse. That knowledge haunts us. Each of us will come to an end. We deny it, ignore it, fight it, and fret about it, but nothing changes it. We are creatures, finite creatures, whose time on earth is limited. We are not God.

By the time we get to the New Testament, and to Jesus' forty days of testing in the wilderness, it has become clear that the question for which we seek an answer is this: What does it mean to be a child of God? What is the purpose of our lives, what are we supposed to be about, and how are we supposed to live?

The burden of having the knowledge of good and evil, is that we have to choose, we have to decide, and we have to take responsibility for our actions. Having that knowledge compels us to act like God, to be responsible like God, even though we aren't God, and that's our conundrum. We are lousy gods: petty, small-minded, self-serving, self-righteous, angry, vengeful, gluttonous, willful, power-hungry, rebellious, anxious little devils who just can't get it right. That is, until Jesus comes along. Jesus gets it right, and shows us that we can get it right too, if we follow him.

Immediately after Jesus is baptized, and he is identified by the Holy Spirit as God's beloved Son, he is led by that same Spirit into the wilderness. There he is tested, not by God because love never tests, but by the devil (small "d"), that desire in each of us to do our own thing, to make life meaningful on our terms, and to deny God's lordship.

The content of the test parallels, quite intentionally, the test that Adam and Eve failed. Like Eve, Jesus is kind of set up. He has been in the wilderness for forty days, just as the Israelites were in the wilderness for forty years. He is hungry, he is vulnerable, and he is helpless. He has only one thing left that he can claim, which is his identity as God's Son. What will he do with that authority, with all the rights and privileges that Sonship affords him? What does it mean to him to be the chosen of God? For what end will he use the awesome power of God that is at his disposal?

The use of power is the content of the story of human history. Whether it's the power of love, or the power of death, humankind has demonstrated its will to use power for personal, professional, financial, economic, and national gain, time and time again. The issue, is whether we use our power for good or for ill, to build up or to tear down, to destroy or to save?

In his baptism, Jesus received the power of faith. But how will he use it? Will he use it to destroy or to save? Will he use it to tear down, or to build up? Will he use it for his purposes or for God's? Will he be a child of God, or a child of Sin? That's the question.

Some of you may recall this story.

Jesus and Satan were a competitive pair, and they were having a heated argument about who was better on the computer. They had been going at it for days, and God was tired of their bickering.

Finally God said, “Cool it, you two! I am going to have you take a test that will settle this once and for all. Each of you will have two hours to do as much computing as you can, and at the end I will decide which of you did the better job.”

So Satan and Jesus pounced on their keyboards and starting banging away. They typed, they surfed, they made spreadsheets, they wrote reports, they sent faxes, they opened e-mail, they sent e-mail...with attachments, they downloaded, they uploaded, they made cards, they did everything they could.

About ten minutes before their time was up, lightening flashed across the sky, thunder pealed, the rain poured, and, of course, the power went out.

Satan stared at his blank screen and screamed every curse known in heaven and earth. Jesus just sighed.

A moment later the power flickered back on, and each of them rebooted his computer. Satan started searching frantically for his work. “It’s gone!” he wailed. “It’s all gone!”

Meanwhile, Jesus quietly started printing out all of the files he’d worked on for the past two hours.

When Satan saw it, he was irate. “Wait!, he cried. He must have cheated. How did he do that?”

God shrugged and said. “Jesus saves.”

Jesus, who in the wilderness is tempted by self-interest to use God’s power to provide for his own needs, resists, and affirms that he does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. Jesus, who is tempted by self-interest to use God’s power to show others just how much God loves him, resists, and affirms that God’s love is not to be tested. Jesus, who is tempted by self-interest to use God’s power to become a god himself, resists, and affirms that God alone is worthy of praise and service. Jesus uses the power of his faith to serve, to love, and to praise God. Jesus passes the test, and with that perfect faith, Jesus saves.

So what about you and me? Are we capable of passing the test too? Is that the message of this gospel, that we too can be faithful in all things? No, of course not. It isn’t in us. But the good news of the gospel is that Jesus passed the test, and Jesus saves. Therefore we follow him. We grab onto his robe and hold on for dear life, knowing that as long as we are with him, we are okay. We hang on his every word, knowing that he alone has the words of life. We pray in his name, knowing that he intercedes with God on our behalf, because his love is utterly selfless. And we enter into communion with him in his church, knowing that though we are still children of Adam and Eve, that anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old is finished and gone. The new has come. We are beloved children of God, in spite of ourselves.

The invitation of Lent is to take a long look at how you are defining your life—to let go of the frantic striving—and to follow Jesus, the One who lived and died and rose again with no illusions, whose faithfulness to God established the pattern for new life, whose love for neighbor restored our sense of community, who showed us what it really means to be a beloved child of God. The church gives you forty days and forty nights to examine yourself, before test day. You’ll fail, of course. We all do, except one, and he saves. What begins in failure ends in victory, the salvation of humankind through the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ. To God alone be the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

PRAYER: Almighty and most merciful God, you made us, feed us, love us, and save us. Help us embrace the power of faith as Jesus did, and use it to commune with you and with one another to your glory and praise. In Christ’s most worthy name we ask it. Amen.

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Matthew 4:1-11
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7