

## Matthew 4: 1-11 Tempted as We Are

Last Wednesday, we entered the season of Lent with Ash Wednesday service. The service began with these words: “Lent is a time of preparation to renew our life in the mystery of the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We begin this holy season by acknowledging our need for repentance and for the mercy and forgiveness proclaimed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We begin our journey to Easter with the sign of ashes. This ancient sign speaks of the fragility of human life and marks the penitence of the community of faith.”

So, almost ironically, we begin our journey of spiritual renewal with the symbol of our mortality. We received the ashes with the words “You are dust, and to dust you shall return,” reminding us that our lives are limited in time and space.

Then there is this language of repentance. Ashes are also a biblical symbol of mourning and penitence. We begin Lent by acknowledging our need for repentance and for God’s mercy and forgiveness, and not just privately as a person but as a faith community. What could this mean and what does it have to do with acknowledging our limitations as creatures of dust?

This is what the Scriptures this morning invite us to reflect on this first Sunday in Lent.

The first story from Genesis which Miguel read for us is familiar to many of us. In fact, it’s so familiar we can see the storyboard. The scene is the garden of Eden. There is Eve. There is Snake. There is a Tree of the knowledge of good and evil with the forbidden fruit. The Snake tempts Eve. Eve eats the fruit. Eve gives some to Adam. Adam eats it..... Today’s pericope ends there, but we know what happens next. Adam eats it and God gets mad and kicks them out of the garden of Eden. The End.

If we just run through these main actions on the storyboard, it sounds like a simple story about how the human being disobeyed God and was expelled from the

garden of Eden, which explains how we get to live in this wonderful world full of suffering.

But, if we pay attention to the details that might not make the storyboard, the story is telling us so much more.

On Thursday after Ash Wednesday, we had our first Lenten Spiritual Journey gathering over the supper of soup and bread. We come together to share spiritual exercises that help deepen our awareness of the Spirit in our lives. So, on this first Thursday, as a starter, we looked at different definitions of Spirituality.

We didn't read it to analyze it, but we did what is called "spiritual reading." We just listened to what's read, without studying or thinking too much, and paid attention to how we responded, noticing a certain word or phrase that drew our attention, that lingered in our mind, and reflected on them. Then we shared with the group what bubbled up to the surface. And someone shared, "I think Spirituality has to do with a purpose. Spiritual life is a life with purpose. I think we are here to take care of one another."

At the very beginning of this story, you just heard it read, "the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." God who created this human being out of the ground placed him in the garden and gave him the charge to take care of the ground. In fact, Adam is a Hebrew word for the human being which comes from the word adama, which means ground.

Humankind is placed in the garden of God's creation to "till and keep it." The Creator who gives life also gives meaning and purpose to life. We are called to serve as caretakers in God's good creation." Just as it was shared during our soup supper.

Then at the supper, still reflecting on Spirituality, someone else shared that Spirituality poses an existential question; all of the creation is beautiful, the nature, the animals, but we, humankind, have much more; we think and we have

knowledge.” Yes, we think as God has given us the ability, and we have desire for knowledge, and that’s what the Snake plays on when it approaches Eve.

The Snake asks Eve “Did God say, you shall not eat from any tree in the garden?” It’s an invitation to question God’s command. Eve tells snake what she knows: we may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but not the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden.” The Snake then “enlightens” Eve by telling her that God said that because God knows when you eat it, you will be like God, knowing good and evil. So, setting aside God’s command, Eve makes her own assessment, the tree is good for food, it looks good, and it is attractive to make one wise; she decides to go for it.

The garden God placed Adam in, was a defined place in which God provided everything the human needed, including the purpose and meaning in life. Within this boundary God created, the creation thrives and lives in harmony. And God gave them the freedom to eat of any tree in the garden, except for one. This freedom from the very start has limits, another kind of boundary. Eve pushed and crossed this boundary when she took the fruit, driven by her desire to know and be like God.

This Genesis story reveals to us our calling as humans and its limits. We are created in the image of God, we are created for purpose and meaning to care for God’s creation, and we are created not to be God or assume the role of God.

Our journey back to be reconciled to God is as old as this story. The Snake is the tempter here in this Genesis story, but the tempter appears throughout the Scriptures, in different names and under different guises. Whether it’s called the devil or Satan, it’s a personified force of all that opposes and resists God’s loving intention for God’s creation.

And Jesus meets one right after he was baptized by John the Baptist. Before Jesus begins his ministry, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness “to be

tempted by the devil.” It sounds like this was someone’s plan. In Matthew, God is always the hidden actor.

But before the devil the tempter comes, Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights. This would have reminded the mainly Jewish members of Matthew church how Moses fasted forty days and forty nights while he wrote down the commandments from God on top of the mountain.

Afterwards, Jesus was really hungry. So, while feeling this very basic human physical condition, he encounters his enemy, the devil.

The devil begins his first two temptations with “IF YOU ARE A SON OF GOD.” But the devil is not questioning IF Jesus is the Son of God. IF here means Since. The devil is not challenging Jesus is the Son of God, it’s challenging what Jesus would DO AS the Son of God. “Since you are the son of God, why don’t you ask your father to.... You’ve got power to do it, Jesus.”

The devil tested Jesus in three ways: first, to satisfy his hunger; second, to put God to test; third, to replace God with a non-God and worship it, in short, to betray God. At a fundamental level, these are the temptations the people of Israel had been put and succumbed to, and perhaps we find ourselves facing all the time.

What the devil was trying all along, was to divert the obedient Son of God from his path, from his calling and its limits, just as the Snake had done to Eve, to make him push boundary God had given him and cross it.

God had placed Jesus in this world, as the embodied force of God’s love in human form, a hungry one at the moment, to redeem the world. All of Jesus’s responses to the devil’s challenge are quotes from Deuteronomy, one of the Five Book of Moses, the Torah, God’s instructions for the people of God.

Here, Jesus is willingly subjecting himself to the laws that God gave to the people. Jesus insists on enduring these temptations as a human being. Jesus was

tempted as a human being like us. Living in our midst, he lived by the divine standards God had set for the wellbeing of the humankind.

So, back to the last Thursday's soup supper. We were still reflecting on those different definitions of Spirituality. Someone else shared that Jesus is such a high bar for us. If Christian Spiritual Formation is about our lives being reformed and transformed to take the shape of Jesus's life, that's a daunting task. And yet, in Jesus, we have the Divine spirit who took the form of human being.

The Spirit of God led Jesus to the wilderness, so that Jesus would be tempted as a human being; and so he was tempted as we are. Just as Jesus insisted on being baptized by John the Baptist when John said "oh, no, I need to be baptized by you; I shouldn't be baptizing you!" Jesus said, "let it be so now," because God has placed him in this world for a purpose, and Jesus lived out its meaning faithfully.

As we begin our Lenten journey through the wilderness of our own lives, we know who it is we are following. It is the Son of God who took the form of human and was tempted as we are. He invites us to follow him in living our human calling, knowing its purpose and its limits.

Jesus sets a high bar, yes, but we don't journey alone; it is together as the Church we are one body of Christ. And, as the one last person shared over the soup supper, God is everywhere, even in our encounter with the tempter, however it shows up in our lives.

Together with Eve, we individually and as a community of faith, fall for the tempter's trap time and again, and so we begin the Lent acknowledging our need for repentance.

And while we are marked with the sign of our mortality on Ash Wednesday, I am grateful that those ashes come from the burnt leaves of the Palm Sunday from the year before. The ashes themselves bear the sign of the hope of Easter, a

beautiful reminder of our capacity for receiving and embodying divine life. Let us pray.

Holy and loving God, in a world that does not understand repentance, we pray for new understanding, humility, patience, and discipline that will help us live our calling as your children in this world. Amen.