

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/13/2011, The First Sunday in Lent
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7, Matthew 4:1-11
Three Stories of Temptation

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text is the devilish lie spoken to Eve:

⁴But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die. ⁵For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (Genesis 3:4-5, RSV)

Till Jesus comes again, you and I stand in the middle of a great conflict between God and the Devil. Even the grammar of our Bible text expresses it so. There stands poor Eve between the two great enemies:

⁴But the *serpent* said to the *woman*, “You will not die. ⁵For *God* knows...

My sermon is a simple one: Let us choose God, not the Devil.

A friend of our congregation, Dr. Rusty Reno, has recently written a commentary on *Genesis*. Dr. Reno has preached here at Immanuel. He is the new editor for the journal *First Things*, which means that he fills the position so long occupied by Richard John Neuhaus, of blessed memory. Dr. Reno’s *Genesis* commentary is brilliant, in my opinion. My friends and I are quite excited about it.

In his commentary, Dr. Reno spends quite a lot of time defending the traditional teaching that the serpent who beguiled Eve is really Satan, a fallen angel. Strangely, modern historical/critical Bible scholars sometimes dismiss that idea. They say that the serpent was simply a creature like the other creatures, except that he was cleverer. Well, Dr. Reno explains that it is best to stick with the traditional reading that sees the serpent as that great deceiver, Satan. Humanity faces a terrible enemy. There is a great Hatred out there. As St. Peter puts it, we poor humans face a predator of our bodies and souls:

⁸Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour. (1 Peter 5:8, KJV)

It will not always be so. The Devil troubles us now, but his days are running out! St. John on the island of Patmos was blessed to see a vision of the Devil’s defeat. He tells us his vision:

And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world -- he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. (Revelation 12:9, RSV)

St. Paul says a similar thing, comforting the Roman congregation with that wonderful adverb “shortly”:

And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet *shortly*¹. (Romans 16:20, KJV)

Well, I say, the sooner the better!

But till then, we occupy a middle position between the Lord and the Devil, each of them promising life, but only the Lord being true.

So, Dr. Reno defends the traditional interpretation of our text as the serpent being Satan. Still, he does not want to obscure the crucial part you and I play in the battle. We are not simply ping pong balls knocked back and forth between God and the Devil. Rather, we get to choose between them. And in the choosing, we find life or we turn toward death. Indeed, choosing the Lord permits us to help sanctify this world and make it a better place. Aye, we make our own lives better too.

Dr. Reno, then, emphasizes the key human role you and I play in the conflict by referring to the Civil War. His great lines goes thus:

While we may not be commanders in the cosmic conflict, salvation history turns on our loyalty. Although the possibility of evil should be traced back to the purely spiritual freedom of fallen angels, we need to be careful. The *origin* of evil should not be confused with the *location* of its ultimate conflict with goodness. The centers of government may have been in Richmond and Washington, but the tide of the Civil War turned at the small Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg.²

In this sermon, I want to speak of three stories of temptation: I mean, the temptation concerning Adam and Eve in the garden, Jesus in the desert, and you and me in this town. Now, the first two stories certainly concerning the turning of the tide of the great battle between God and the Devil. But what of your temptation? of my temptation? Are our individual battles and tests of temptation really so important? I think they are. At least, I want to suggest that how you and I fare in the temptation besetting us is really quite important, both to us and to the world.

Let's consider the three stories then, starting with the battle between Eve and

¹ Or “soon,” as the RSV puts it.

² R.R. Reno, *Genesis* (Brazos Press: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2010), page 84.

Satan in the garden.

One of the chief things about the fall of Adam and Eve was the lie told them by Satan. It was not a bold-faced lie, but it was a heartbreaking, cruel lie nonetheless - a lie befitting that great enemy of our souls. What Satan said was a declarative phrased in the negative:

⁴But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die."

In some sense, the Devil was right. There was some, mean, portion of truth in what he said, for they ate of the fruit and they did not drop down dead on the ground. At least, not immediately.

The problem with the declarative negative is that it can promise so much more than it actually delivers. The words of Satan *suggested* to Eve that by disobeying God she could gain more than she already had. It suggested that she could keep the life she had and add to it -- that she could have superabundant life.

But that is not how it worked out, and that is not what Satan had said. He had simply said that Eve would not die. But it is consistent with those words that she would have misery henceforth. The promise that you will not die is a very different thing from the promise that you will have abundant life.

And I bet you and I know that ourselves by sad experience. How many times have we yielded to temptation, found it pleasant enough at first, but then afterwards found it bitter and disappointing? How many times could we kick ourselves afterwards, sigh, and say to ourselves, "What was I thinking? I must have been out of my mind!"

Our Maker seems to have made us in such fashion that we incline toward the good and the lovely, and if they are not really good and lovely, we imagine them to be so. We put on rosy glasses. We persuade ourselves that "this is going to be great!" Few of us are built to choose the bad and the ugly. That would be rather depraved. No, we choose the good, even if we have to *force* it to look good when it really isn't. And so we rationalize. We say to ourselves, "I *must* do this thing. Life will be empty otherwise. No one will be badly hurt -- maybe hurt a little, but not badly, surely." And so, we commit the adultery. We launch the crooked financial deal. We buy the illegal drugs and take them. We sell the illegal drugs.

In the Johnny Depp movie about John Dillinger, *Public Enemies* (2009), the gangster pauses on his way out of a bank robbery and says to one of the customers, "We're taking the bank's money, not yours. See, yours is right there on the counter." And he leaves, as if he is a fine fellow. But he is simply falling under the sway of the lie, "You will not die. Things will be fine."

The lesson of Adam and Eve is this: We never really make things better by disobeying God. Adam and Eve lost a lot by yielding to the lie. They lost paradise. They lost their daily walk with God.

Let's turn to the second story of temptation: Jesus in the desert, tempted by the Devil. Here I want to focus on the first answer of Jesus to the Devil. When Satan tempted Jesus to turn the stones into loaves of bread, Jesus answered by referring

to the Word of God:

⁴But [Jesus] answered, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’” (Matthew 4:4, RSV)

Jesus is not discounting bread here. A hungry world needs bread, and as Jesus preached in his Sermon on the Mount, our heavenly Father knows we have need of food.³ Indeed, in the prayer our Lord taught us, he reminds us to pray for our daily bread.

No, the problem for Jesus is not bread. The problem, rather, is that he was being asked to repeat the sin of Adam and Eve long ago. The great background for their sin was the contented judgment of the Lord when he had finished all his labors and regarded his creation:

And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day. (Genesis 1:31, KJV)

The things of this world are good in the eyes of the Lord. They are useful to him. They are as he wanted them to be. And therefore, everything shines with a kind of sacredness about it.

But Adam and Eve kidnapped part of God’s creation, as it were. The Lord had created that tree in the middle of the garden. That tree was good in the eyes of the Lord. Indeed, Martin Luther speculated that God gave humanity that tree as a gift so that we would have some concrete way of expressing gratitude to our Maker. We could express our loyalty to God in the plain, old-fashioned form of leaving that tree alone. A deep need of the human heart to worship the Lord could have been answered by the simple form of obeying the Lord when he said do not eat of that tree.

In any case, that tree was the Lord’s, to be used according to his Word. But, by a kind of transformation of sight, Adam and Eve began to look at the tree, not as sacred, not as belonging to the Lord and to be used according to his purposes, but according to their own notions.

And that is the one thing Jesus would never do. He let the Devil know it right off the bat. He did not intend to live his life “worshiping the creature rather than the Creator.”⁴ He did not intend to lose his feel for the sacredness of the things of

³ Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³²For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. (Matthew 6:31-32, RSV)

⁴ Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; ²¹for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. ²²Claiming to be wise, they

this earth -- the way everything should be cherished because it belongs to God and is meant above all for his purposes.

In the end, Jesus regarded his very own life the same way. He put his life to service of his heavenly Father. He did it fully, without reservation. His prayer in Gethsemane puts into articulate words his whole manner of life:

And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt. (Matthew 26:39, KJV)

That trick of sight, that transformation of seeing by which we try to convince ourselves that such and such a temptation is really *our* business, that the Lord is not much interested in it, and that there ought to be some stretch of life in which *we* are the emperor... well, Jesus did not participate in that tricky seeing. And we should try to avoid it too.

And this leads me to my third story of temptation: yours and mine. Earlier in this sermon, theologian Rusty Reno likened times of temptation to the battle of Gettysburg. We are not the source of either good or evil, but we might well be the location at which the key battle is fought. Are our spiritual struggles really so important?

The thing is, for all we know, our particular struggle might be important indeed. In the end, the war between God and Satan is going to be won by God. Yet in the meanwhile, the war can ebb and flow back and forth. And I sure wish that I would not so often be on the ebbing side of things.

In his *Genesis* commentary, Dr. Reno has a good saying about sin: he says that sin is like a bad rumor.⁵ Sin extends. Eve eats of the forbidden tree and soon enough, then, Adam does too. St. James likens the tongue to fire, warning that it has the potential to set the world ablaze:

So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! (James 3:5, RSV)

As it is with gossip, so is it with sin: it has the potential to set the world ablaze. Yielding to temptation can have far-reaching consequences. It can leave broken families and broken hearts. It can ruin safety, health, and finances. But not only that, but also this: Sin passes itself on to others. Eve sins, thereby making it much more likely that Adam will sin too. If you and I yield to temptation, we thereby multiply the evidence that will lead some poor tempted person to say, "Oh, why

became fools,²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen. (Romans 1:20-25, RSV)

⁵ Reno, *Genesis*, pages 90-91.

should I resist? *Everybody* else is doing this sin too.” Thereby, we have contributed to the fall of someone else.

And if that one gives way, then he or she makes it more likely that someone else will give way too. And thus the wild fire spreads.

The great thing about Jesus is that it all stops with him. It is like the tsunami, it is like the command of the Lord to the raging sea:

Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here shall thy proud waves be stayed? (Job 38:11, KJV)

Jesus of Nazareth is the one human being who faced temptation and stared it down. From first to last, he yielded not to Satan, he hurt no one, and he misled no one into sin. He lives. It is the great song of the Church. This Jesus lives and asks us to join him in stopping the wildfire of sin. He lives, and invites us to join him in turning this thing around, through his grace, help, and merits, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.