



SERMONS THAT WORK

Lent 1 (A)

[RCL] Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

On Temptation

Seldom do we get such richness in Scripture—two of the most powerful and evocative stories in the Bible on the same day. And when it comes to stories about temptation, these readings just about cover the waterfront.

First is that wonderful account of Adam and Eve and their problems in the garden. Here they are, in paradise, everything's going just great, and along comes this lousy snake with a smooth line and some new ideas. Next thing you know, temptation triumphs, paradise is history, all is lost, and the man and the woman are left with fig leaves, regrets, and a sour after-taste.

Then, in a powerful contrast, Jesus is driven from his baptism into the wilderness—which is just about as far from paradise as you can get. There, unlike Adam and Eve (who were surrounded by ease and plenty), Jesus has nothing; he is exhausted, starving, weak, and alone as he struggles with his time of temptation and challenge.

The two stories form such an obvious contrast that it's impossible not to compare them, and to look for what emerges when they are taken together. On one level it looks simple enough: Jesus is the winner, and Adam and Eve are the losers; they are weak and he is strong. So, you might conclude, it's better to be like Jesus than like Adam and Eve.

What's more, since today is the First Sunday in Lent, there is the added point that Lent is supposed to make us stronger so we will be more like Jesus than like Adam and Eve—at least as far as such things as *temptations* are concerned.

And that's almost right. There really is such a thing as being more or less in shape spiritually, such a thing as being more or less able to handle the demands of a serious Christian life. This has

to do with character, and with the development of virtues, or habits.

Doubtless, the disciplined rigor of a holy Lent can take us several important steps in a good direction. The spiritual “muscles”—again, really just habits—we develop with disciplines like a Lenten rule are exactly the same ones we use in daily life, when the decisions we make can have serious consequences.

And don’t forget, what makes the story of Adam and Eve a *true* story is not simply that it describes something that happened somewhere else a long time ago—that’s not what’s at issue here. One way the story of Adam and Eve is a true story is that it describes exactly what life is like here and now. It tells the truth, not about them, but about us. And over and over again, we find ourselves just like them. We are forced to decide what to do with something which, on the one hand, looks really good—something that seems useful and popular, and just might teach us a thing or two—but which, on the other hand, we strongly suspect is not what God, and our better selves, think best for us. And we must choose. When that happens, we might well find that it is better to be stronger, to have developed some of those spiritual habits that help us to choose in the right direction.

So there is a real value to the familiar notion that we all need to buff up a bit, and that Lent is a good opportunity for doing this, or to begin doing it.

At the same time, there are also some risks to coming at things this way, as useful as it might seem. For one thing, all this talk of getting into shape can lead to the sort of macho spirituality exemplified by the young monk who bragged that he could fast any man in the monastery right under the table—which sort of misses the point of spiritual growth. For another, we can fall into a mistaken idea of what victory is really all about.

Notice again what’s going on in Jesus’ temptation. He has fasted and prayed for a long time, for long enough to get the job done (that’s what “forty days” means), and he’s famished—he’s exhausted, worn out, beat up from the weather and the loneliness and the effort it takes to sustain something like this.

He’s not at his best; he’s not bursting with physical or spiritual or any other sort of strength. He’s used all that up by just making it to where he is—by just being faithful to the fast. And this is when the temptations hit Jesus.

Now, I suspect that if the tempter had caught him on a good day, Jesus would have had all sorts of answers of his own to the devil’s three challenges—to the temptations—he was given. He might have told wonderful parables or asked clever and insightful questions right back at him—and put the devil on the spot. But strength and energy and cleverness were all gone. There weren’t any left.

We know about this, too—and this is a different sort of temptation from the one Adam and Eve

faced. This story models times when we face strong, or compelling, or addicting, or beautiful, or just plain hard temptations and we have flat run out of resources to resist them.

No matter how strong we were to start with, we simply can't any longer move in the direction we want, and we are drawn instead along lines defined against our will, by our appetites and our ego. It's not just a matter of not being strong enough; it's a matter of being empty. That's where Jesus was—he was famished; he was out of gas; and he was tempted, really tempted.

Look at what happens: Jesus does not say one word of his own. Instead, he quotes scripture in a simple and straightforward way that is quite unlike how he uses the Bible almost everywhere else in the Gospels.

Jesus has no words, no resistance, no strength of his own—he's simply holding on to the Father, and letting the Father's words, and the Father's mind, come through him.

Jesus' response to the tempter is not a victory of personal, spiritual strength in some sort of holy temptation-lifting Olympics. Instead, his victory is the gift of grace that comes from surrender.

Doubtless his time in the wilderness gave Jesus a stronger and more disciplined relationship with the Father. (And, as a human being, Jesus paid attention to such matters, just like we do.) But it also gave him something else, something more, something we see emerging in this story of his temptations.

His time in the wilderness gave Jesus the insight and the courage to surrender, and so to depend not on his own best efforts, but on an emptiness that can only be filled by the Father, and that can only be filled by a gift of grace.

Several months after this all happened, Jesus said to his disciples: when you are handed over to your enemies, “do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time.” It's fair to suspect that, when he said this, Jesus could taste the dust of the desert and hear again the voice of the tempter, could remember that hunger that reached out greedily even to the stones around him. He knew what he was talking about.

At the end of the day, the spiritual life is never about us, about what we can and cannot do. At the end of the day, it is always about God, and about God's gifts—gifts of grace, gifts that do not fail.

The Rev. James Liggett is the retired Rector of St. Nicholas' Episcopal Church in Midland, Texas. He is a native of Kansas and a graduate of the University of Houston and the Episcopal Divinity School. He has served parishes in Kansas, Texas, and Oklahoma.



Sermons that Work and Bible Studies that Work are a joint offering of Forward Movement and The Office of Communication at The Episcopal Church.

<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/bible-study/>

<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons-that-work>