

"LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION?"
February 13, 2005 - First Sunday in Lent (Racial Justice Sunday)
Scripture Readings: Psalm 121; Matthew 4:1-11
Sermon Text: Genesis 2:15-3:7
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Almost every time we gather in worship we recite the Lord's Prayer. And, as happens to almost everything in our lives that we do over and over and over again, this recitation becomes just that-routine recitation. So, when we ask "our Father who art in heaven" to "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil", we don't give a lot of thought to what we are asking. Now, if we do give it some thought, we probably conclude that we are asking for help in avoiding those seductive situations in which we are tempted to do something sinful. Surely that is part of what we are asking; but there is more to sin than something or some things that we do. We may assume that we need help when temptations attack our weaknesses, but there is more to it than that. The scriptures offer some insight into the matter.

Let's begin at the beginning, at least at the beginning of the Bible.

Listen to the familiar story in the second and third chapters of Genesis:

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree in the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day you eat of it you shall die."

Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." . . . So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man . . . and took one of his ribs [and made it into] a woman and brought her to the man. . . .The man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves."

There are different ways of looking at this passage, and I would not say that any one way is better than others. One way is to see the sin of Adam and Eve as their failure to obey God's command. God said, "Don't eat the fruit of that tree", and they disobeyed. Another way, going just a bit further than we read, is to see Adam and Eve's sin as their refusal to take responsibility for their disobedience: Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the serpent. These are both good and helpful ways of seeing the passage. I tend to look at the nature of the temptation and see Adam and Eve's sin in terms of their response to it. Basically, Adam and Eve were not content with the terms of the creation; that is, they were not happy about living as subordinates to God. The passage indicates that Eve "saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes", but neither of these is a compelling temptation to disobey God's command. The next temptation, though, has real power: "that the tree was to be desired to make one wise"-or, in the serpent's words, "when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil".

You may not feel that you are tempted to be like God; after all you are surely aware of your physical and intellectual limitations. But when we examine ourselves closely, we must acknowledge a number of ways in which we succumb to this very temptation. My sermon three weeks ago pointed out some ways in which leaders of a nation may believe themselves to be God-like; I referred to the new policy legitimizing preemptive wars-at least legitimizing them for us, because we know that we are on God's side in the geopolitical realm. Yesterday was, as you know, the 196th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth, and this Sunday in Black History Month has been designated "Racial Justice Sunday", reminding us perhaps that American slavery and the racial discrimination that has followed are possible only when one people feels superior to another people. Lincoln himself said, "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master."

Lead us not into the temptation to be masters.

Think about this temptation to be like God in terms of "knowing good and evil". I've often wondered why the gospels present the Pharisees in a bad light; after all, they were the most moral, most liberated and liberating religious group of first century Judaism. The simplest answer I have come up with is that their system of laws resulted in their thinking that they were capable of passing judgment on others. In other words, they were convinced that they could distinguish between good and evil, that in the moral realm they were superior to others. And we don't have to look far to find that mentality alive and well in contemporary society. It is probably a positive thing to "know good and evil", but when we have that knowledge-or think we do-we are tempted to become judges of what is good for everyone else; and that is a kind of evil.

Lead us not into the temptation to be judges.

There exist in the world today groups who believe they know the very mind of God about

various matters and want to enact laws that will compel the rest of society to obey their understanding. Obvious examples include the supporters of the Sanctity of Marriage act, those who insist that the words "under God" be part of the Pledge of Allegiance, and Right to Life groups that seek to do away with Roe v. Wade. Segments of this last grouping are even willing to murder those whom they believe to be "murdering unborn children". In other words, those who do not agree with their understanding of God's will are not to be accepted as legitimate elements in American society. Some wise person once said, "God did not create humans in his own image; humans create God in their image." We humans are constantly equating God with our own understanding of who God is and what God wants. We know that is true of rigid fundamentalists in every religion; we need to remember that it is true also of you and me.

Lead us not into the temptation of being certain that we know God.

Temptation is not in and of itself an evil thing. When we read the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, we begin to see that the various temptations brought Jesus to an understanding of the kind of Messiah he was supposed to be: he was not to become the kind of Messiah who would get people to follow him merely by meeting their physical needs, although he was very responsive to physical and mental needs of people everywhere. He also refused to astonish people into believing him, although his work was unimaginably astonishing. And he would not resort to political power to bring God's kingdom in, although time and again he confronted religious and political power with his life and message. The temptations were important to his development, even as various challenges and tests contribute to our growth and maturity. Let us admit it: each of us has a hidden desire to be tempted. We want to prove ourselves strong enough to resist. We may not embrace every challenge, but we do like challenges; and, as was the case with Jesus, our development depends on them.

As we said at the start, we understand that temptations come when and where we are weak and vulnerable. What we may forget is that even greater temptations attack us at our strengths. We need help if we are to resist those temptations that hit us where we are weak and likely to do things that can destroy us; perhaps even more do we need help when we seem likely to let our successes and triumphs convince us that we are God or that we possess some sort of superiority over others.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen.