

“IF”
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11
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“If” is a powerful word that interrupts the flow of things and casts doubt into a scenario or story. The readings for today are filled with places where “if” might logically enter into the picture. What if the stories had ended differently? What if Adam, Eve, the devil, Jesus, or even God had made different choices or asked for allegiance in different ways? We know these texts well, but as I read them this week it seemed that there were layers in each of these stories that aren’t often confronted and these layers might just impede our ability to fully know God or be fully known by God. And as we enter into Lent it seems that much of our journey centers on how to more fully know God so that we can be prepared for the joy of Easter.

Our texts take us into some interesting places: First, we have the Genesis text, which offers us the first example of sin in the bible. This text has thus been used to paint all of humanity with the scarlet “S,” (not the Superman type either!) This one marks us all as sinners under the banner of Adam and Eve’s “original sin.” Adam and Eve fell and thus we are all fallen or so the theology goes. This week Adam, Eve, and the serpent are paired with the story of the temptation of Jesus and his hat-trick of scholarly and faithful responses to the devil that tempts him. These are interesting texts which are appropriate on the first Sunday of the season of Lent when we are called to admit to and wrestle with our sins. But I would argue that these texts also spark some pretty interesting questions that begin as we insert one of the shortest words in our language: the word “if.”

As we explore our texts, let’s begin with Genesis and the depiction of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Let me be perfectly honest here: this thing seems like a set-up . I imagine God setting Adam and Eve amid a beautiful buffet of vegetation, amid a beautiful buffet of plants and animals, and as they walked around to inspect their new digs God notes that everything is theirs—well, almost everything. “Don’t touch that tree—the one in the middle, the one that offers the knowledge of good and evil and is filled with beautiful fruit and placed at the center of your garden home.” Now I’m not a literary critic, but you can see where this is going from a mile away. My own parallel experience has played out more than I would like to admit when the waitperson says, “Don’t touch that plate, it is hot!” And of course, once they have turned their back, there I am touching the plate to see exactly how hot it is. So part of me wants to ask God for some kind of “fairness rule” here, because we all know—serpent or not—Adam and Eve were going to eat from that tree. Which leads me to the whole “original sin” idea: If we would all find ourselves eating from the tree, what is so original? Moving away from the tongue-in-cheek response, I know that Adam and Eve’s sin was in not listening to God and in not following the one command they had been given. But honestly, I struggle to understand how this one moment should have us all labeled as “fallen” and thus somehow doomed to sin. Clearly we are called to follow the commands of God—I know that to be true. But I wonder whether the rather hopeless position that Adam and Eve found themselves in doesn’t say as much about God as it says about humankind. I know that I will never have the totality of knowledge and experience possessed by God, and I suspect that Adam and Eve knew this also. Why then was it necessary for God to tempt them? This may seem

theologically irresponsible to say, but Adam and Eve's punishment doesn't seem to fit the crime. And that is where I begin to wonder about how this story is told. Because the God I know is equitable, is loving, is concerned with reconciliation, and in this story I struggle to find these things; yet I continue to hold to my belief that they are central to who God is. But if God is all that I claim God to be, then how does the set-up "fall" of Adam and Eve offer proof of God's love, compassion, and grace? If God really is love, and grace, and compassion, then why aren't we all living in Eden? If we are really supposed to confront our own sins doesn't the fractured relationship between Cain and Abel offer a more convincing depiction of sin than Adam and Eve's choice of food? Clearly God was with Adam and Eve even after their sin; but as I read this story I cannot help but find myself wondering what their sin really means!

The gospel reading likewise has me baffled, but in a different way. Quite frankly I think our gospel reading provides a perfect answer for anyone who is struggling with how to understand the divinity of Jesus. In my mind the story of the temptation proves that Jesus is divine, because if he was just an ordinary human I guarantee you that those rocks would have been turned into bread, and that the angels would have been forced to catch an ordinary human being. And I also know that someone would have placed a "sold" sign on all the real estate that could be seen from that hillside, because an ordinary person—this ordinary person included— would have eventually succumbed to the possibilities that the devil was offering. And that is why I am not exactly sure how the temptation of Jesus is really all that instructive to me and to us. Sometimes it seems that because the gospel writers seem so concerned with conveying that Jesus is the savior there are times when the stories are just not that convincing. This is one of those moments because temptation, especially the temptation to test God, is an all-too-familiar reality for humankind. But, unfortunately, this passage doesn't seem to offer much to us mortals. This is frustrating because we are all accustomed to testing God. And then we find ourselves living in fear of being voted off the island by our God because we cannot match the perfection of Jesus, and we know what happened to Adam and Eve. And thus our sin becomes shame and our relationship with God becomes perilously fractured.

But we all ask the questions: " If God is love, what must I do to get God to listen or answer? What if God isn't generous and compassionate like we believe? If I go too far with my questions and fears, will God still listen? God, if I do "x" will you answer in the way that I want?" These are the "cosmic bargains"—as I like to call them—that we all attempt to make with God; but our desperation is compounded, because in our questions we find ourselves living in fear and shame. And, thus, the distance we feel between ourselves and God is multiplied and the stain of that original sin grows. It becomes a nasty cycle of questioning and fear and drifting away because we are somehow convinced that we have left God. And that is why our unwillingness to speak the language of "sin" is so dangerous: it convinces us that we are not worthy when the truth is we are just as worthy of God's love as any generation of followers has ever been. Humankind has always wrestled with God, and God has remained steadfast by our side; but too often that story is not told or remembered.

From the time of Adam and Eve we humans have been bargaining with God; sometimes it has been about what food we can eat, and other times our arguments have taken on a more personal tone. Liz alluded to her own wrestling with God in the newsletter this week, and I recognized myself in some of

her questions. My wrestling and my screaming at God took place while I was in seminary (of all places). It was there that God and I had a series of ongoing negotiation sessions that began after Shauna and I had a miscarriage during my first year in Berkeley. I vividly remember standing on the shore of the San Francisco Bay and shouting to God that I was seminary, that we had moved away from our friends and family, and I asked God what more could be asked of me. I remember the bitterness I felt when I was sure that, even with our sacrifices, God had abandoned us. I remember the shame that I felt sitting in my New Testament class while trying to talk myself back into the faith that had been my rock for my entire life. I remember wondering if God might be as angry at me as I was at God. And I remember hoping that somehow I would find my way to a time when I wasn't tempted to turn my back on God, when I could find the strength to claim my faith and my God. I wasn't sure it was possible, and I would guess that for many of you there have been moments when faith moves from being a known quantity, and instead becomes contingent on an "if": If I can find it, if only I could see clearly, if I could be whole again, maybe then I could find my way to God.

But as we throw our questions and our "ifs" at God, some ancient and traditional theologians would say that we just don't have faith enough, that we don't truly understand the nature of God, that we can't grasp the true power of God when we insert an "if" into our understanding of God. But I think this is garbage, theologically garbage maybe, but garbage nonetheless. Because I believe that to eliminate God from being susceptible to our questions and our doubts is to assume that God is less than who we know God to be. Our questions don't really impugn God; they are merely an avenue for the fullness of God to be more completely revealed. Our attempts to bargain with God do not fracture some contract with God, but instead illuminate the places where our relationship with God can grow. I am convinced by God's love that even in our moments of greatest doubt, even in our moments of gutless and faithless hypocrisy, and even in our most heated bargaining sessions with God, God remains intimately connected to us in a way that cannot and will not be compromised by our humanity; and that is the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ that is beyond question.

As we enter into Lent, it is vital then that we do not see the stories of sin or the perfection of Christ as a sign that we are somehow unworthy of God's love and redemption. The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is meant to free us—not just of our sins, but of all our fears. But God can only free us if we are honest with God, and we can only be honest with God if we put our questions out there. So as we move into Lent, let us do so by taking an honest look at our sins and by honestly confronting God with our questions, our fears, and our doubts. Let us not limit God by hiding who we are; God can take whatever we throw out there. God's love is not bound by our "ifs," and thus we should not be bound by them either. Open your hearts to God...pour out your questions, your anger, your indignity; let God have it all. God will redeem us and nothing will impede God's grace. Let our journey be an honest one. I promise, God can handle it! Thanks be to God. Amen.