

The First Sunday in Lent
Genesis 2: 15-17, 3:1-7
Matthew 4: 1-11

The Rev. Lyn Zill Briggs
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Salt Lake City, Utah
February 9-10, 2008

I wonder about the origins of the stories in today's scripture readings. Because, I'm certain there were no eyewitnesses to Eve's encounter with the serpent, or in the wilderness for 40 days with Jesus. I wonder if Jesus shared his inner struggles with his disciples waiting for the sun to rise over the Sea of Galilee after a long night of fishing. Perhaps Jesus' story went something like this:

It seems so long ago now. I heard that my cousin John was drawing big crowds, baptizing in the Jordan River, and I felt compelled to hear him preach. I'll never forget the moment I was drawn into the water, when everything seemed so clear, so perfect. I could have stood there forever, basking in God's delight and soaking up the Spirit.

I felt so ready to begin preaching and healing and teaching and yet the next thing I knew I was in the desert, alone with wild animals, not knowing what to expect. There was no food, and after wandering, searching, praying, and pleading, I took time to rest. And then it happened. I don't know if I dreamed it, but it seemed so real. It doesn't really matter because what I learned there is still real to me. Satan approached me, all alone --- there was no where to go. I know you're hungry, he said. Why don't you turn these rocks into bread. Why do you bother with this act that you must suffer like they do?

And I was hungry. For a moment he had convinced me. To use my power to end my immediate discomfort. But I remembered who I was, and I remembered the moment in the river, the moment when I realized that I was here not to make life easy but real and deep. I remembered the scriptures; bread isn't everything, but the word of God sustains me.

I felt stronger after that. Yet I was still in the wilderness. I wandered around after that, and began feeling like I'd never find my way back to start doing what I had been so sure God had meant for me to do. Despair started to set in, and I actually thought perhaps if I just threw myself from the highest point I would be at peace. Either way I knew God would take care of me --- with angels to catch me or at least I'd end this struggle inside. And I could hear Satan whispering in my hear, You know it is written, that He will command his angels and they will lift you up in their hands." But then I remembered the moment in the river when I felt God's love, all of God's love, and I remembered the scriptures: Do not put the Lord your God to the test. I prayed for strength, took a deep breath, and kept on.

At that point, with the hunger and the walking and the hot sun, I think I was probably hallucinating and I imagined that I was at the very top of the world, wherever that is, and Satan himself was there and he said, I can end this you know. This doesn't have to be so difficult. You don't have to do this: just let me take care of everything: tell me now, that you will be mine, and I'll make it all good. You can have all that you can imagine -- the power, the glory, the riches. Just tell me that you will be mine. You'll never be tired or hungry or alone again.

I was so tired. And hungry. And lonely. I wanted to go home. And I'd actually thought if I could just show people some spectacular rescue, or do a major miracle or take the reigns of the political world, my ministry really would be so much easier. But I remembered the water, the Spirit, and all that I was called to do and be, and I told him to get lost.

Then it was all over. I found sleep. And comfort. And surrounded by love, and filled with all I needed to begin my work. I thank God for the lessons I learned, but I don't ever want to go through that again.

So I'm here to tell you to beware. . Beware the temptation to be more than human. But also beware the temptation of being less than God called you to be simply because it would be so much

easier. I promise the same Spirit which was poured upon you at your baptism will lead you through those struggles. And the angels which attend God night and day will find some way to care for you.

Both of our stories – about Adam and Eve in the garden and Jesus in the desert leave us with a deeper understanding about temptation, choices and consequences, speak of the struggle to be fully human and in right relationship with God.

In the garden of Eden, we witness Adam and Eve exceed their limitations, pushing to take control of that which does not belong to them: knowledge. It is a misuse of their humanity. The natural consequence of their poor choice is a strained relationship with their Creator. The temptation they could not resist was to be more than human. They traded what they knew, relationships without shame or guilt, with no barrier between them and the God who walked with them in the garden, for the promise of something better.

The wildernesses we encounter leaves us feeling helpless. without resources, confronting the unknown, alone before God and faced with difficult choices like Jesus'. There we see things we'd rather not see, and parts of ourselves that are unfamiliar, and unpredictable. Jesus struggles in the desert were with those which accompany being fully human: hunger and uncertainty and impatience. His choices, hard won, led him to a greater understanding of the humanity and the work to which he was called .

Our culture tends to think of sin as breaking the rules or overstepping boundaries or participating in evil. But, theologically, sin is whatever it is we do or don't do that places obstacles to God's love in our lives. These acts which become impediments to wholeness God wants for us, are fueled by our desire to escape our feelings, our fear and even our freedom, the long and difficult process of becoming fully human. We naturally fear the unknown and I believe we are terrified when we realize the power of the freedom which God has given us. We often misuse that freedom to obtain comfort, or convenience, or more power.

At the end of both stories of struggle and temptation, we hear of God's grace, the great care for those he loves deeply. God's relationship did NOT end when Adam and Eve made a poor choice. He actually removed them from the situation that might tempt them again. The scriptures say that they made fig leaves to cover their shame, but later on in the chapter, God himself makes them clothing to keep them warm and safe.

Jesus ends his time in the wilderness in God's gracious care as well. Angels, messengers from God's very presence minister to his needs. His strength is renewed. His identity and mission are now clear and somehow his story passed along to those of us who still struggle, to be fully human and to be in right relationship with God.

Remind us, O Spirit of God, who we are and whose we are as we struggle to become who you would have us be. Amen.