

“We Get to Choose”

1st Lent – March 5, 2017

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

2:15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. 2:16 And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 2:17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." 3:1 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'?" :2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3:3 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.'" 3:4 But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; 3:5 for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 3:6 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. 3:7 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.

Romans 5:12-19

5:12 Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned-5:13 sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. 5:14 Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come. 5:15 But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. 5:16 And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. 5:17 If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. 5:18 Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. 5:19 For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Matthew 4:1-11

4:1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 4:2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 4:3 The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4:4 But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" 4:5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 4:6 saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" 4:7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 4:8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 4:9 and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 4:10 Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" 4:11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Seems like only a few days ago we were on our knees with the wise men in adoration of the new born king. Seems like only yesterday when the child, now grown presents himself for baptism in the Jordan at the hands of his cousin John. Seems like we just got through hearing the story of the trip up the mountain with the disciples and we sang 'Jesus on the Mountaintop.' And if you look at my thumb you'll still see the ashes under the nail and in the grooves of my thumbprint even days after the mark of ashes were placed upon us in our initiation into the season in which we find ourselves... . It is Lent. And now on this first Sunday of Lent, when the temptation is to do all we can do to let these forty days breeze by on our way to spring and Easter we are faced with temptation – Jesus' temptation and our own. And as temptation goes this temptation is meant to be instructive.

After the transfiguration, we speak about embarking on the journey of Lent – down in the valley we're heading off to Jerusalem. But, in point of fact the story Matthew tells today is a flash back to the beginning of Jesus ministry. As he begins his preparations there are temptations to be dealt with, decisions to be made, commitments to adhere to, a destiny to follow. Jesus must have learned a lot about himself in that 40 days, and when put to the test, his resolve to be authentically who he was and was supposed to be overpowered the more base desire for food, for fame, for power. The story is instructive for us in that we get to place ourselves over against Jesus. We quickly discover that we are not like Jesus and any comparison is pretty much futile. But it is still instructive.

As Lent rolls around once again facing our nature in the face of temptation is a good thing for us. We have temptations to deal with and decisions to be made, commitments to adhere to and if we believe we're called – a way we are to follow. But today and every day, as did Jesus, we get to – or have to -- choose.

Being able to choose is of course what we want to do in our desire to be self-determining. Ask any kid, as we did moments ago, if they'd rather have a piece of candy or a wad of paper and almost always they'll take the candy. Even though what they don't know is (open a wad) choices can be deceiving. We get to choose and every choice is laden with temptation. We choose all the time and most of our choices seem to be benign. Lent comes along and tells us that our choices affect others? And what we do and how we live matters.

One of the worst temptations is to liken our temptation...or that of humanity represented by those super parents Adam and Eve, to the temptation of Jesus. Only, where he was resilient and strong, we, were then and are now almost comically....easy. The tempter, evil, satan, the devil, whatever one chooses to call it has, an easy time with our greatest grand folks and if we are honest continues to have much the same kind of time with us today. We find it amazingly difficult to deal with temptation – to make the right choices. And of course the grand temptation is to brush it off by saying, 'yeah, but we're only human and Jesus was, well Jesus was Jesus.' When the whole point of the story for us is to see that Jesus, with his resolve in place, with his determination to do God's will in place – made fully human choices. Only doing the opposite would have produced the supernatural.

It is not easy for us to be and do what we are called to be and do. Right from the get go, back in the garden we have always figured we have the best notion of how things are to be done, of what we need to do them, and when we get caught with apple juice running down our chin we always look for the elusive someone else, Eve, Adam, the devil, to blame it on.

The lesson of Jesus in the wilderness is that the one who was most perfectly human knows that true freedom, true liberation, comes with a price, it comes with responsibility, it comes only in the subjugation of the self. Why is it we hate that notion so badly? Why is it so difficult to be even what we say we are?

A man was being tailgated by a stressed out woman on a busy boulevard, when suddenly, the light turned yellow, just in front of him. He did the right thing and stopped, even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection. The tailgating woman hit the roof, and the horn, screaming in frustration and making a few unkind gestures as she missed her chance to get through the intersection.

As she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer ordered her to exit her car with her hands up. He took her to the police station where she was searched, finger printed, photographed, and placed in a holding cell.

After several hours, a policeman approached the cell and opened the door. She was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects.

He said, I'm very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping off the guy in front of you, and cussing a blue streak at him. I noticed the 'Honk If You Love Jesus' license plate, the 'What Would Jesus Do?' bumper sticker, the 'Follow Me to Sunday-School' bumper sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk.

Naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car.

Now...what the heck does that mean? Well it means we get to choose, doesn't it? It means we have a tendency to diminish our true sinfulness in the face of convincing testimony that we are a long way from where we need to be. It is all about being aware that with the freedom that is ours, there comes the responsibility to live in that freedom. And in our sometimes ridiculous human nature we choose to commit the atrocious sin and seek to buffer it with the simple act of discipline. We declare who we are but don't live like it.

We are fortunate.....I think....to live in a nation in which we are free to do and pursue just about anything we want. And to say anything we want. We are free to come to worship...unlike some places in the world...or not. We are free to raise our children in the church...or not. We are free to be aware and responsive to the needs of others around us...or not. We are free to, especially in Lent, consider what

we are like....if we are prejudiced, or narrow minded, or hard headed, or judgmental, or mean spirited, or a gossip, we can see our behavior and work to change.....or not. And therein lies our temptation and our choice.... To take what is offered freedom....and forget the responsibility. Or greet the temptation and with God's help over come it...

Whatever else we come to know today....we must realize that, as with Jesus, this is a process...we start now....and the truth is it doesn't get easier. The choices become more difficult. There are many steps along the way. There are people to meet and situations to consider. There are lessons to be learned and taught. And by the very nature of Lent, we find ourselves dragging a cross along. A cross of decision. Choice.

As always...we are free to choose. But here's something to think about....where is our real freedom? In doing what we want...or what God wants?

In lent we get to think about just that... we also get to think about the fact that in God's grace we are fed on the truth of God's sacrificial love – the same Jesus who was tempted to turn stones to bread feeds us today – remind us that in him we don't ever have to be hungry or thirsty for truth, for life, for forgiveness, for love. We continue on the journey today and are sustained as we go with this bread and this cup. We get to choose – what he offers us is himself.

