



Lent 1 (A)

Surrender

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

Seldom does our lectionary give us 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 is exhausted, starving, 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, 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 all of this is *almost* right. There really is such a thing as being more or less in shape spiritually—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.

What's more, doing this has some real parallels with getting into shape physically or intellectually. Doubtless, the disciplined rigor of a holy Lent can take us several important steps in the right direction, and the spiritual muscles or habits (or virtues) we develop with disciplines like a Lenten rule are exactly the same ones we use in real life—when the decisions we make can have vastly more important and immediate consequences.

Don't forget: What makes the story of Adam and Eve a true story is not that it describes accurately something that happened somewhere else a long time ago—that's not what's at issue here. What makes the story of Adam and Eve a true story is that it describes exactly what life is like here and now—it tells the truth, not just about them, but about us. Over and over, we find ourselves just like them—forced to decide what to do with something which, on the one hand, looks really good, seems useful and popular, and that just might teach us a thing or two—but which, on the other hand, we strongly suspect is not what God thinks best for us. And we have to choose. When that happens, it's better to be stronger and to have developed some of our spiritual habits.

So, there is a real value to the notion that we need to buff up a bit, and that Lent is a good opportunity to do a bit more of this – or to begin doing it.

At the same time, there are also some risks to coming at things this way, as valuable as it can be. For one thing, all of 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 get a mistaken idea of what getting it right is really all about.

Notice again what's going on in Jesus' temptation. He has fasted and prayed for a long time—for as long as it takes—that's what "40 days" means—and he's famished. He's exhausted, worn out, and 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 in just making it to where he is—in just being faithful to the fast. *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 swell answers *of his own* to the questions—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—this is a different sort of temptation from the one Adam and Eve faced. This is when we face strong, or compelling, or addicting, or beautiful, or just plain hard, temptations and we have flat run out of resources.

No matter how strong we were to start with, we simply can't any longer move in the direction we have chosen to move, and we are pulled instead along lines that are against our will but defined 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. He's nobody's puppet, not even God's. Jesus' temptations are hard, there is nothing automatic here.

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 unlike how he uses scripture virtually anywhere 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 that comes from surrender. (Now, think again about Adam and Eve.)

Doubtless, his time in the wilderness gave Jesus a stronger and more disciplined relationship with the Father; and as a fully-human being, he had to pay attention to such matters, just like we do. But it also gave him something else, something more, something we see in his story of 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." Imagine that Jesus could taste the dust of the desert and hear again the voice of the tempter and remember that hunger that reached out 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.

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