

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

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Lenten 1A 2008

In the Name of our one living God, ever creating, ever loving, and ever sustaining: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This Sunday is the first Sunday in our Lenten season and our readings today reflect what Lent is all about. It is about human nature and beginnings – why are we the way we are? It is about human dissatisfaction, frustration and how life can veer crazily of its tracks. And it begs the question – where is God in all this?

Our reading from the Book of Genesis is from the first and oldest of the two Creation stories told in Genesis. Its principal characters are human archetypes – Adam (meaning earth being) and his partner Eve. It is all about human desire, human limitations, and the temptation to extend our limits. It is an ancient folk tale, and while not literally true, it seeks to explain why we are the way we are and forces us to probe great truths. It all starts with cravings. Damn that apple looks good! And then that small voice inside us starts talking – and what a wonderful conversationalist it is indeed! What is wrong with eating good fruit? After all we have to eat to live, and what could be healthier? What is wrong with knowing good and evil? Isn't that very useful information? And the answer to these sensible questions always runs into human hubris and the answer is the very real and very unclear, "Yes, but...!" The Garden Story from Genesis says this has always been so. Desire, it seems, is both necessary and dangerous.

After our service booklet was printed, I decided to start our service with the Decalogue, the 10 Commandments. I did this not only because it is liturgically fitting for the first Sunday of Lent, but because it relates to our readings and the way Jesus shows us as a way out of this confusion. Half of the 10 Commandments deal with the dangers of our desires: you shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness. The last (which is longer in the Exodus version) deals not with desire but with misplaced or misapplied desire: You shall not covert anything that belongs to your neighbor. At heart, the Bible warns against letting our personal desires take over our lives. The Bible is the story of humanity's problems with this over thousands of years and the newspapers and TV show us we still have our problems with this.

In our Gospel lesson, following Jesus' baptism, He is led by the spirit into the wilderness where his new identity and ministry will be tested during his fast of forty days and forty nights. Here Matthew is clearly placing Jesus in the context of God's desired relationship with God's people: Forty days and forty nights – like Moses and Elijah's God's greatest prophets of old. The Israelites were tested for 40 years in the wilderness of the Sinai. Is Jesus up to his calling as God's Anointed, the Messiah? And if so, how does he do it when all others have failed?

Jesus is famished. His desire couldn't be more acute! The tempter asks him to use his power as the Son of God to turn stones into bread to feed his hunger. Jesus responds with a quotation from the Bible, actually from the eighth chapter of Deuteronomy: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." This frustrates the devil to the point where when he tempts Jesus to prove his doubts by self destructively throwing himself of the Temple's roof, the

devil himself quotes scripture to back himself up. Nothing new there! Jesus again responds with a quotation from the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” Finally, the devil offers Jesus all worldly wealth and power if he would only put the devil before God. Jesus firmly dismisses the Devil with another quotation from Deuteronomy, this time Deut. 6:13: “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.”

The devil than left and, like Elijah, Jesus’ is fed by God’s angels. Jesus emerges from his wilderness testing with his identity and ministry confirmed: he is the Living Word. In many ways, the truths Jesus reminds the devil of in the wilderness are similar to those he teaches us in the Lord’s prayer and are based on the first two commandments: 1. God is God and neither we nor anyone or anything else is; 2. God is faithful and loving and will provide all we need – our daily bread; 3. God can be trusted – thy will be done; and 4. we can be in right relationship with God and one another through forgiveness – forgive us our trespasses as we forgive others.

Lent is the time we are called to enter our personal interior wilderness to ask ourselves questions like what do I really need? What do I really value and trust? Do my desires bring me health and knowledge or do they harm me and leave me confused? What desires go unnamed and thus unmanaged? Jesus emerged from his wilderness with insight and conviction and so can we. I don’t think God tempts us to play “Gotcha” and to destroy us. If anything, Jesus and the Bible he quotes to the devil tell us just the opposite. The new translation “save us from the time of trial” affirms God’s desire to help us.

Paul was someone who by all accounts did not live the life of Riley! As tested as he was, he acknowledges in his letters (especially in First Corinthians) that he was

never tested beyond endurance and always in the end found a God greater than anything, good or bad, that this life could bring. Paul and all the saints testify to what Jesus teaches: God has not put us in a maze that has no way out. We just have to get the basics right.

Amen.