

# Sermon for March 5, 2017 – “Being Human”

## Westwood First Presbyterian Church

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First Sunday of Lent, Year A – Texts: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

Once, four clergymen were spending a couple of days at a cabin. In the evening they decided to tell each other their biggest temptation. The first one said, “Well, it’s kind of embarrassing, but my big temptation is bad pictures. “Once I even bought a copy of the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition*.” “My temptation is worse,” said the second. “It’s gambling. “One Saturday instead of preparing my sermon I went to the casino.” “Mine’s worse than that,” said the third. “Sometimes I can’t control the urge to drink. “Once, I actually broke into the sacramental wine.” The fourth clergyman was quiet. “Brothers, I hate to say this,” he said, “but my temptation is worst of all. I love to gossip, and if you’ll all excuse me; I’d like to make a few phone calls!”

It’s the first Sunday of Lent, and with respect to our two readings this morning, we rarely encounter passages that tell us so much about ourselves. But, more than that, they’re about how we’re to live in the world with both honesty and hope. Honesty, in terms of the realities of life as it is at present, and hope, as it might be in terms of our Christian faith in God’s promises.

Our first reading tells the story of “The Fall” of Adam and Eve. It’s one of the most iconic passages in Scripture, cropping up regularly in paintings, music, literature, film, and television. I’m thinking, however, that as interesting as it may be as an ancient mythic explanation of the origin of sin, it’s even more compelling as a portrayal of what it is to be human. Here are Adam and Eve, living in bliss in a beautiful garden created by God and given to them to till, tend, and enjoy. Yet even in paradise they’re incomplete, insufficient, and ultimately insecure. It’s this insecurity that the serpent plays upon, and he calls into question the fundamental trustworthiness of God. “God hasn’t told you everything,” the serpent suggests. “Completeness, wholeness, self-sufficiency, mastery, these are within your grasp.” And by naming their incompleteness the serpent makes it clear. He draws their attention to their want, their lack, their need; the way a dentist probes a cavity. In examining this, 17<sup>th</sup>-century French philosopher, Blaise Pascal, spoke of the human condition as one of having a hole, what he called a “God-shaped hole.” He said, “What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in humanity a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This we try in vain to fill with everything around us, seeking in things that are not there the help we cannot find in those that are, though none can help. Since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object, in other words, by God alone.” Interestingly, Pascal didn’t see this as a flaw. No, he actually he saw this as the means by which God keeps us tethered to our life-giving relationship with Him.

Similarly, Augustine writes that God created a restlessness in our hearts that can only be satisfied when we rest in God. Addressing God, Augustine wrote “Yet man, this part of Your creation, wishes to praise You. You arouse him to take joy in praising You, for You have made us for Yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in You.” George Herbert went so far as to describe this same restlessness as the “pulley” by which God draws us back to Himself.

Read, in light of these classic theologians, the story of the Fall indicates that before this thing we call “original sin” rears its ugly head. There’s what has been called “original insecurity.” Adam and Eve, then, are tempted to overcome that original insecurity not through their relationship with God but through the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Fruit, in that moment, that looked to be shaped just like their hole. Now jump to the Gospel reading. At the heart of the temptation of Jesus rests the same insinuation that God isn’t trustworthy. “**If** you are the Son of God,” the tempter begins. This pernicious “if” calls Jesus’ relationship to God into question suggesting that He could and should establish Himself on His own terms. Jesus, as the true “second Adam” (as Paul describes Him), resists the temptation to define himself apart from God. Jesus is, instead, content to know **who** He is in relation to **whose** He is.

So, here’s my question for you this morning. I want you to think about it, sure, but more than that I want you to take this home with you. I’d like you to take your time answering it. I’d like you to do so over this season of Lent. The question is this: **what tempts us?** What do we seek that we believe will fill our own God-shaped hole? What do we look to in hope of eliminating our “original insecurity”?

The PBS documentary series *Frontline* produced an episode in 2004 called “The Persuaders.” It sought to answer a similar question by examining the evolution of modern advertising. In years past, advertisements boasted of the quality of the product. Not too long ago, they’d seek celebrity endorsements. Today, however, advertisements are less about the **quality** of a product, and more about an **imagined lifestyle** owning the product can somehow provide. Advertisers suggest that by owning this kind of car, that kind of cellphone, or by shopping at a certain store, we’ll discover our identity; that is, who and what we are, and move closer to having a better, more meaningful life. On the face of it, such advertising sounds ludicrous. Seriously, how can using a particular deodorant or driving a certain kind of car enhance your sense of self-worth? Yet the documentary suggested that they can and do. It gives strong evidence that people are so starved for meaning and purpose that they buy these claims hook, line and sinker! Think about some of the things that you buy. We make many of our purchasing decisions based on our hope that the claims commercials make are true. The claims that we’ll feel less alone, less incomplete, and more whole if we simply buy their product. Let me be clear, it’s not that the stuff itself is bad, it’s that we **expect** too much from it. As one guest on the program said: “In the end it’s just a car, laptop or a pair of running shoes. They may be great, but they’re not actually going to fill those needs.” Which brings us back to the gospel reading.

One way to look at it is to imagine that Jesus shows us the key to resisting temptation...How? By finding our identity in our relationship with God. And I think there’s something to that. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that this story takes place right after Jesus’ baptism in all three synoptic gospels...that is, Matthew, Mark and Luke. Immediately after He’s first identified as God’s beloved Son, Jesus is led out into the wilderness. After forty days and nights, He has that identification tested. Likewise, it seems to me that the better we are in remembering our baptismal identity, that we too are beloved by God, the less likely to succumb to the various pressures that seek to tempt us. The less likely we’ll be to identify ourselves in terms of what we have. But there’s more here. Because, at the same time, it’s important to recognize that temptation isn’t a “one and done” deal. We wish. Jesus rejects the tempter **here**. But He has **other** moments of doubt, doesn’t He? Oh, yes. In the garden of Gethsemane and (of course) on the cross.

Similarly, our life as Christians doesn't eliminate doubt, need, or a sense of incompleteness. Not one bit. Rather, we're oriented to our relationships with God and with those places where our needs are met though not taken away. What's more, as heirs of Adam and Eve, we'll inevitably fall short in claiming our God-given identity. Paul was right in saying that "all sin and fall short of the glory of God." Yet Jesus has triumphed. Not only at this moment in the wilderness, but also – and more importantly – on the cross. He committed Himself and His destiny to God. Therefore, when we fall short we can confess our failings trusting that in and through the crucified and risen Jesus we have the promise of forgiveness and new life.

Theologian Richard Swanson has an interesting take on the gospel reading. He sees Jesus' hunger as something that's not just a physical condition but a measure of "what it means to be a human being." So, the test is about Jesus' faithfulness to who He is and what God's calling Him to do, not to ask for special privileges or place or relief, but to enter fully into the human condition of want and need and pain. The temptations attack Jesus in those places, theologian Dean Lueking writes: "where humans expect the best, daily bread, sacred spaces, the devotion of the heart...In other words, at his core. Therefore, doesn't it make sense to not focus so much on **external** things, certainly not on the sins and weaknesses of others, but on our own 'inner places of the soul' where the real and daily struggle becomes absolutely personal." Here's the thing...Where are those places for you? I think that Lent ought to be a time when we attempt to find out. A time of reflective examining of the inner places of the soul. Jesus is tempted in ways that one scholar says "symbolize all of the possibilities for doubt, misdirection, bad choices, and unholy distractions to which God's people are ever at risk." For us, when we settle into a comfortable faith, we're tempted today to turn away from the suffering of the world. Tempted to build our own defenses against doubt and risk, tempted to concentrate not only on our own needs, but also our wants, before thinking of others. In doing so, we forget who we are and whose we are and thus become easy pickins' for the tempter. It's not unusual for our focus to be limited, too inwardly focused. I think that's understandable especially since there's so much pain and disappointment outside the walls that so many have erected to protect themselves from the world. We'll take care of ourselves, our family, occasionally (maybe) our church, but we really don't have time, energy (let alone the ability) to reach beyond those narrow lines drawn protectively around us and our loved ones, the people we know.

It seems to me what the temptations boil down to is the devil's attempt at keeping Jesus' vision too small, and those on the receiving end of His work too few. Of course, we know that Jesus' mission was anything but small and it was about more than one person. We know that God's love reached out to the whole world through Him, as it continues to do today. I think there's a powerful lesson for us and for our church. And I say that because aren't we often tempted to focus narrowly on our own needs, our own beliefs, our own plans? As Christ resisted the temptation to make the gospel too small, we must do the same. The devil is all empty talk; All lies. Perhaps we need to spend some time in those empty places within us that belong to God alone, listening instead to a gospel larger than we'd ever considered and opening ourselves for what is yet to come.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.