

Sermon, Lent 1A, 3/1/2020, St. David's Episcopal Church, Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7, Matthew 4:1-11 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

March 1 is St. David's Day, but when it falls during a Sunday in Lent, we are required to observe Lent, not the feast day. So that's why we have purple instead of our wonderful St. David's Day stoles and hangings. We will observe St. David's Day at our Wednesday Eucharists this week.

Do you all remember the year that Deacon Bill was preaching the children's sermon on first Sunday in Lent, and he gave all the kids a large chocolate bunny, and then told them they couldn't eat it, but had to *look at it* until Easter Sunday? He was trying to teach them something about temptation. It made me think of the traditional version of the Lord's prayer: "lead us not into temptation." Is giving little kids a chocolate bunny and telling them not to eat it leading them into temptation? If it is, Bill is in great company: we just heard in our Gospel that "Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil."

In the early 70s there was a study you might have heard about: the Stanford Marshmallow Experiment. Small children were offered a choice of an immediate reward, or two rewards if they could delay gratification. Basically, they would sit in a room with a marshmallow or animal cookies or pretzel stick—their preference—and the adult would leave for fifteen minutes, and then when they returned, if they child hadn't gobbled the treat, they would get another. The experiment was refined and changed and ultimately it seemed that economic background played a significant role but resisting temptation like that is hard for kids. If Deacon Bill had given the chocolate bunny to the kids' parents to store in a high cupboard until Easter, I bet more kids would have made it.

In Lent, many of us fast from something, recalling Jesus' time in the desert as described in our Gospel reading from Matthew today. The devil didn't show up until Jesus was famished, and then he tried to tempt him away from his destiny, using Scripture to make his arguments.

Jesus was famished, meaning he was in a weakened state, yet he managed to resist. Think about that term "weak moment," or sometimes, "a moment of weakness." It's a cliché: that time when some of us succumb to temptation, act in a way that is contrary to our principles. "In a weak moment, I let Pepper have a sixth treat." "In a weak moment, I extracted the toffee that Gary had thrown away out of the trash can and ate it."

Sometimes we try to avoid situations in which we would be tempted. Vice-President Pence, for example, has been much mocked for his personal policy not to dine with women alone. I understand why this bothers many people—it bothers me, as a woman in a male-dominated profession who has had many male mentors. If they had all refused to eat with me, I would have lost a lot of learning. But I sympathize with the VP trying to keep temptation away.

Please note: I am not making a political statement, neither condemning nor supportive the vice president. Our county is too divisive right now. But I know this example is one most of us would have heard of, so I'm using it, without regard to Mr. Pence's political affiliation. So if you're freaking out, calm down.

I think his position is extreme, but even though I have many male mentors, colleagues and friends, I have never, for example, invited one of them back to my hotel room alone for a drink, even though I have done exactly that with female friends and colleagues. With male colleagues I may eat with them, have coffee with them, go hiking with them—but I don't invite them to my hotel room alone.

But sometimes we can't avoid a moment of weakness. I've noticed that I am more inclined to overeat or make bad decisions when someone I love just died or when I'm angry or when I'm anxious. Sometimes we talk about people being vulnerable. Jesus was in a vulnerable position alone in the desert, famished. Other people are also in vulnerable positions and might be tempted to do something they wouldn't otherwise do.

But temptation is not always about a moment of weakness. Sometimes we can be tempted by something when everything is going great. Think of our Genesis reading. Adam and Eve had everything. They were living large in the Garden of Eden. They had it all: except fruit from *one* tree. One tree in a garden filled with trees.

One interesting little bit I want to point out, in case you overlooked it, is that according to the text, Eve appears to *interpret* what God actually said. God is quoted as saying, "You may eat freely of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat it you shall die." Eve adds to this that God says "nor shall you touch it."

I don't want to go too far down a rabbit hole here, since I'm preaching a sermon instead of leading a Bible study: but what do you make of that? Was Adam alone with God when God commanded him, and he embellished the story when he retold it to Eve, or is she adding to it now? Is that kind of like avoiding temptation: don't even *touch* the fruit?

Eve 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: so she took it, and so did Adam.

Could they have said, "It was a moment of weakness"? The snake wasn't threatening them with harm. Unlike Jesus, they weren't famished.

Temptation is tricky. The tempter is tricky. I can't write a sermon entitled Three Surefire Ways To Never Be Tempted Again In Your Life because you *will* be tempted, in small ways and big ways. What are you going to do?

Our collect of the day asks God to help us who are assaulted by many temptations and acknowledges that we all have weaknesses. This is something we can focus on during this holy season of Lent, which started last Wednesday. What are your weaknesses? How will you be tempted? How can you grow stronger spiritually? These are important ways to examine yourself during Lent.

In my Ash Wednesday sermon, I suggested that if you don't yet have a Lenten discipline, you seek inspiration from the Litany of Penitence in the Ash Wednesday liturgy on pages 267-269.

Unlike the Great Litany, which I have grudgingly learned to like but still find a bit over the top, the Ash Wednesday Litany of Penitence reminds me of my many weaknesses.

My pride at being a rector and a writer. My impatience when things happen slower than I'd like. My self-indulgent appetites and ways such as being a candy addict. My envy of those more fortunate than myself, such as those with children, or homes along the lake of the Chautauqua Institution. My intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts, such as owning more books than I can read. Uncharitable thoughts toward my neighbors—I better not go there personally. Waste and pollution—I haven't been able to completely cut plastic. Lack of concern for others—especially right now, as I deal with healing from surgery and am, I hate to admit, having trouble focusing beyond myself and my own health.

Listing it all out like that makes me sound like a terrible person, and I'm not a terrible or self-hating person, honestly. But Lent is a time for me and for you to honestly examine ourselves. To look at areas in our lives where we fall short, and to avoid or resist temptations that lead us further down those paths.

Take one thing from that list of many weaknesses from the Litany of Penitence, for example: how about "envy of those more fortunate than ourselves." How do we resist temptation to wallow in our envy? First we need to acknowledge it exists. When I envy, I try to look at my own life and remember privileges I enjoy that others envy. I focus on gratitude for those things.

One of my favorite things about this church season is hearing from all of you about what you are going to give up or take on this year. Please share this with me and let me know how it goes. And if you give something up but mess up, try again. You are going to be tempted. You are going to be tempted when everything is going well and when everything is awful. How are you going to respond?