

Lent I – Encountering God: Witnessing God in temptations

Sermon March 9, 2014

Toronto United Mennonite Church

Genesis 2: 15-17; 3: 1-7; Matthew 4: 1-11

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Tempting Stories

Temptation. Doesn't that sound like a ... tempting topic? ☺

At the start of of Lent let me tempt you into revisiting these foundational stories this morning, – and by tempt I mean “to put you to the test in a venturesome way or to provoke you.”¹ Eve tempted by an apple – yes, I know, there's not even an apple in the story; Jesus being “tempted by Satan” in the wilderness.

The other day I was giving my friend Bernard a ride. Bernard is a Catholic brother and he takes his faith very seriously. He lives by a vow of poverty and service. On that ride, he was very upset about the Lord's Prayer and he was telling me about it. He found it inconceivable that we would regularly ask God to “lead us not into temptation.” The idea that a loving God would do such a mean-spirited thing, or that God would be the source of alluring someone into evil just doesn't sit right with Bernard's idea of who God is. Nor did it fit with several biblical translations he had consulted. Bernard's little rant found a lot of resonance with me.

You'll notice that the version of the Lord's Prayer that we shared just a bit ago, instead of “lead us not into temptation” says “save us from the time of trial” and takes God off the hook from being the instigator of temptation. I myself prefer that translation and that concept as well, for more reasons than one.²

While I do believe that there are things in life that test and tempt us, I squirm at the thought of a God who goes out of the way to concoct ways to make sure we're up to

¹ Tempt: to put (someone) to the test in a venturesome way; provoke: to tempt one's fate. Obsolete . to try or test. (dictionary.com)

² Created by the English Language Liturgical Consultation (according to Wikipedia.com)

snuff and to give us a pass or a fail at the end. I'm familiar with that God; *he* still shows up far too often in Christian theology and practice.

That way of understanding God comes from a way of thinking that I find too dualistic, too clear cut (and it's not a coincidence that clear cut also refers to the decimation of trees). Too clear cut about the nature of God and of good and evil (or of knowledge as the Genesis story calls it). It puts me in mind of a poem by Shel Silverstein that I used to read to my sons:

Zebra Question:

"I asked the Zebra,
are you black with white stripes?
Or white with black stripes?
And the zebra asked me,
Are you good with bad habits?
Or are you bad with good habits?
Are you noisy with quiet times?
Or are you quiet with noisy times?
Are you happy with some sad days?
Or are you sad with some happy days?
Are you neat with some sloppy ways?
Or are you sloppy with some neat ways?
And on and on
and on and on
and on and on he went.
I'll never ask a zebra about stripes...again."

Dualism is great when it comes to the one's and zero's that run our computers, but not so great when it comes to comprehending and describing God and our journey of faith. For that, we need the language of stories. Stories are open to interpretation, feeling, intuition, to different meanings in different times, and are just a bit harder to pin down; and that's a good thing.

In last week's sermon, Marilyn mentioned some wisdom by first peoples, who remind us of the need to [move away from dualism, to see creation and not "fall" as a starting point in Genesis, to redefine what is meant by "spiritual" and to reclaim the

significance and power of story without desecrating stories by dissecting them.] I heartily, concur.

But of course this should be obvious to us, stories are what the Bible is all about. John Epp gave me a book with a very interesting title, *The Return of the Chaos Monsters – and other backstories of the Bible*. This book points out how the “Holy Writ” is unique in that it has been shaped to be a story, even the parts that are not narrative, [that you don’t recognize them as story right off the bat], turn into story [psalms, legal passages, genealogies], are fit into a bigger story about God [about creation and about humanity] ³

Besides, isn’t it true that we shape meaning in our own lives by creating narratives to make sense out of our experience? Something happens, then you reflect on it, you tell somebody: “You’ll never believe what happened...” A great example is what Tim gave us this morning, something happened and he has found a narrative that creates a deeper meaning for himself. We are aware of this, yet we are not immune to the temptation to shape God’s stories into rules and lists of things we must assent to or “believe” intellectually and cross off a checklist.

I propose that during Lent, we are being invited to re-align ourselves with the open-ended and wonderfully complex story of God present in Creation and in Jesus, and in our own experience.

Speaking of stories, I would like to mention that the Genesis passage we heard is part of a very early creation myth, one of many in the ancient world and one of two in the first chapters of Genesis.

³ The author says: “Even the ‘begats’ function as links in the chain of cause and effect through their insertion into primeval and patriarchal sagas. Even the legalese appears as words that Moses spoke from Mount Sinai. Everything has a setting in story.” Gregory Mobley, *The Return of the Chaos Monsters – and other backstories of the Bible*, p. 4.

It's a myth. As one of our youth likes to point out "It didn't actually happen." But I would say, it did, it does. It's a moral history not a physical history.⁴ It's a narrative to hold the great big question of who are we, where did we come from and why do we act the ways that we do? The Judeo-Christian tradition does not have a corner on this approach to meaning making. Many peoples throughout time have used this way of trying to answer this type of question. Stories just hold those questions better.

Genesis 3 is arguably one of the most controversial passages in the Bible.⁵ People, such as the Christian fathers, have perceived many things in this part about the serpent and Eve and her man Adam: sex, sin, the "Fall of Man," the origin of evil, work, labour pains, justification for women's inferior status, original sin, etc, etc. Most of the interpretations of this story have been pretty negative about this particular passage. The reason it is important to mention this is that this particular myth and this particular story have shaped western culture in many profound ways. Western culture, that's us. We have been shaped by the ways we have understood this story in Genesis. This is especially true regarding what we believe about ourselves as humans and about God. It's only one way of understanding the story about Eve and the tree and the serpent.

I find it interesting that Jewish readings of this scripture story do not find this to be about the origin of sin – a word that incidentally is not mentioned in Genesis. Rather, in the narrative of scripture "Genesis is but the first of several encounters between God and human beings in which both sides learn about the perils and possibilities of the human condition."⁵

Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to tell you what the "correct" meaning of this story is. As you consider consider this scripture passage during Lent, I invite you simply to loosen up what you think this story signifies in terms of temptation. It may

⁴ W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah, a Modern Commentary*

⁵ Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss, *The Torah, A Women's Commentary*.

not be about how inherently evil humans are, and how inherently arbitrary God is. For instance:

- Could it be about the origins of free will, rather than the origins of some fundamental human tendency towards disobedience?
- Could God's caution about eating from the tree of knowledge of everything really be God's lament about humans losing their innocence, rather than a prohibition? Similar to when a parent experiences this with their own children?
- How would it change the story for you to know that ancient cultures (the ones that were around when this story was first being told) considered the serpent to be a symbol of fertility? Or that serpents are associated with both poisoning and healing?
- How would it change the story for you to consider that it was the desire for knowledge rather than the desire for immortality that motivated human actions; and that this is very different from other ancient myths where the desire for immortality is the motivator.
- Could the myth be about hope for a different kind of relationship with God?

Why am I telling you all this about Genesis 3? Well, because I would like to suggest that in Lent you may not want to begin with the assumption that "temptation" is a straightforward concept. What are we being tempted from? What are you being tempted to?

Let's check out our second scripture passage, the "testing of Jesus."⁶

Did you ever wonder who the source of information was for this account of Jesus' temptation? How did the gospel writers know it happened? Well, it was probably

⁶ In case you didn't know, it is these 40 days that Jesus spends in the wilderness (whether literal or metaphorical) are what inspired the idea of Lent. 40 Days leading up to Easter (not counting Sundays) where Christians place ourselves on a journey with Jesus.

Jesus himself who talked about it to his followers, who told them. So think about why Jesus told it in the way he did. Does the fact that Jesus shaped this narrative about his experience make a difference to how we hear it?

As it is told here in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is baptized, hears words of *assurance* from God, and then is led by the Spirit -- the breath -- into a wilderness, presumably alone. This story shows up in three gospel accounts, so was important. In Christian interpretation, just like the Genesis story, this story about Jesus' temptation is also "overlaid with assumptions that are foreign to it."⁷ I don't think we can come up with a "true" version, again. But we need to be aware that we are interpreting and understanding a story.

The other thing about this is that it might be a story about "temptation" but it isn't really about that piece of chocolate cake that you know you shouldn't eat. It's just a bit more complicated and less specific. As Peter Haresnape reminded us in his recent sermon, our temptations, like Jesus' are in the realm of "principalities and powers."⁸

The idea of wilderness being a place of testing, echoes the story of the people of Israel coming out of Egypt through the water; and then through their own set of 40 (this time 40 years) figuring out who they were in relation to God. They wandered, they were hungry and utterly dependent on God for sustenance. In that way this episode with Jesus lines up with the bigger narrative of the Bible. It turns out that weakness, doubt, hunger and testing are sometimes a necessary part of a journey of encountering God.

In addition, this idea of God sending an adversary has echoes from the ancient story of the Job, where an appointed agent, a prosecutor, examines Job's, or in this case Jesus' integrity. Just like the Eve story, it might not be about a battle between cosmic

⁷ Richard W. Swanson, *Provoking the Gospel of Matthew*.

⁸ Ephesians 6.12

good and cosmic evil, a Satan versus God confrontation, but rather a working out of what it means to be human in relation to the Divine.

Jesus, as the Jew that he was, uses scripture to argue his case with the legal agent sent to test him (who also uses scripture). The Biblical narrative holds the answers *and* the questions; in other words, things always need to be figured out. Biblical passages need to be in conversation with each other, knowing your Bible in your head is very, very helpful, but it's not an end in itself.

Here's another thing I wonder about that story. What was Jesus being tested for? Was it like a pass/fail test or was it a DNA test? He was being confronted with the human systems of power and desire, to see how he would choose to behave, to see what he was made of. This is also the kind of temptation that we are up against.

To make it closer to our experience, I thought of offering you a version of this story where Jesus is tempted to order a super size meal at a fast food franchise, then taken to the Oscars where he is offered a best actor award and a loyal following a paparazzi and fans, and then taken to a Central Bank or Stock Exchange or UN Security Council with insider information or veto power.

I'm pretty sure Jesus' reaction would have been the same. Jesus chose to align himself with a narrative that is about trusting God for sustenance, for validation and for power. God help us, may we, as Jesus' followers also be made of the same stuff.

During Lent we are invited to create a little intentional wilderness for ourselves, a time to journey with Christ, perhaps a time of testing: to set certain things aside, to abstain from certain types of food or habits that will frazzle us enough that we pay attention and test our own values and our own level of trust in God. What have our encounters with God taught us about the perils and possibilities of the human condition? What narrative are we embracing to give meaning to our lives?

As we consider this story of Jesus' testing, hear it as an invitation from God to re-center, to commit or recommit our behavior and our values to the Kingdom of God.

During your Lenten reflections small traditional "temptations" might actually be a presenting factor. But I propose that we consider the bigger picture: our temptations in today's world, as always, are about where our allegiance lies, about which narrative is shaping us. Like the story about Jesus, we are also being confronted with the human systems of power and desire. What will your response reveal about you? What will the aftermath reveal about who God is?

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