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

**March 5, 2017; First Sunday in Lent**

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Lent is the season of basic training for discipleship. It’s the time of the year in the church when we drill down on what it means to be children of God. To help us, we might choose to give up something for these 40 days; others might choose to take on something instead.

For example, I might give up time on Facebook each day so I can be more attentive to what God is saying to me or I could take on the practice of noticing and thanking God for all the ways God cares for me. Either way, the point is to choose something that enables us to claim and live more fully into our identity as those who belong to God.

When Jesus enters the desert for his basic training, , he gives up food and takes on the devil to confront the full weight of what it means to be the Son of God.

On Wednesday, about 25 of us gathered in the chapel to begin our basic training by smudging ashes on each other’s foreheads and reminding one another that from dust we were formed and to dust we would return. It was a powerful way to renew our understanding of what it means to be a child of God, a creature of dust, given life and shape by the Creator.

For me this annual ritual has taken on another layer of meaning since my father’s death. My parents’ church has a memorial garden where members can choose to be buried. Almost eight years ago now, we added my father’s ashes to that holy ground, as the pastor said, “We commit his body to the ground, dust to dust, earth to earth, ashes to ashes.”

From the ground God has formed us and to the ground we all return, in one way or another -- a powerful symbol of what it means to be human, shaped and molded by God.

The language that we use on Ash Wednesday and at burial services originates with the story that Charlene read from the Book of Genesis. In this creation story, God forms the first human being from the dust of the ground, breathes life into his nostrils and puts him in the garden to till and keep it.

God generously gives him everything God has made, except one thing. Eat anything you want in the garden, but do not eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or you will die.

As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, “God drew a line in the Garden of Eden and said, “Human beings on this side, God on this side. Tree of life on your side, tree of the knowledge of good and evil on my side. Stay on your own side of the line if you know what’s good for you.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

And that’s when the trouble began. Seizing the moment, the serpent approaches Adam and Eve, with the intent of undermining their relationship with God. Really, he asks? Do you really think you will die if you eat from that tree? You will be like God, knowing good and evil.

In that moment, Adam and Eve forget who they belong to and, consequently, who they are. They give in to the temptation to create their own identities and destinies, apart from God.

In his exploration of today’s readings, David Lose claims,

… typically [we] think of identity as something we forge on our own, [but] most of our sense of ourselves comes from the community we belong to, our family of origin, and the folks with whom we hang out. In this sense, identity is always given, even borrowed, not simply created.

A quick example. No one wakes up one day and says: “You know who I’m going to be? I’m going to be one of those crazy people who paints my face, wears a costume, and goes wild at football games rooting for my team.” Instead, you hang out with friends, watch lots of football, decide to go to a game, discover someone has brought body paint, and then all of a sudden realize you are one of those persons! You could say the same about the women in purple and red hats at restaurants, or bikers, or Trekkies, or just about any of the other groups we associate with and from which we derive a lot of our identity.[[2]](#footnote-2)

By forgetting that their primary identity is derived from their relationship with God, Adam and Eve try to strike out on their own, not trusting that God has already given them everything they need. Right from the start, the biblical story reveals the tension we all face between claiming the identity God has given us, on the one hand, and the temptation to forge our own identity, on the other.

Some people see Jesus as a step removed from the human condition, from the tawdry snare of temptation. Not Matthew.

According to this Gospel writer, Jesus’ testing begins almost immediately after his baptism. The voice from heaven has just declared him the beloved Son of God with whom he is well-pleased. And “then,” still wet from the River Jordan, “Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”

The temptation for Jesus and for every other human being, first told in the story of Adam and Eve, is to forget who they are. They are not tempted to do something evil but to be like God. Adam and Eve succumb to the temptation but Jesus does not. They want to become more like God; Jesus is content to remain human. The irony, of course, is that those who try to play God turn out not to be such good human beings after all, while the one who is content to remain human is called the Son of God.

Three times Jesus is challenged by the devil to strike out on his own and three times, Jesus says no. “If you are the Son of God,” asks the devil, “command these stones to become loaves of bread.”

Taking Jesus up to Jerusalem, to the top of the temple, the devil says, “throw yourselves down” from here. Don’t you believe God’s angels will protect you?”

And taking him, finally, to a high mountain and showing him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor, the devil says, “I will give you all of this if you will but fall down and worship me.”

Each time, Jesus says no. Unlike Adam and Eve, who reject their God-given identity and worth, Jesus does not. He fully embraces what it means to be the Son of God, beloved by God and claimed as God’s own.

It’s not that he has something against miracles; during his ministry he cures lepers and paralytics, people possessed with demons, the blind and the mute. It’s not that he doesn’t trust God’s promise to protect him; during his ministry, he challenges the disciples and the crowds over and over not to trust in the security of their possessions but in the security of God’s love. It’s not that Jesus doesn’t want to be the Messiah; during his ministry, he embraces the title.

What he won’t do is reject the role and ministry God has given him. He would rather endure his hunger fast than change stones into bread for food. He would rather walk the road of human life, with all its pitfalls, than ask for an exemption. He would rather be God’s humble servant than worship the powers that could give him the world on a silver platter.

Had he chosen the devil’s way, Jesus could have avoided a lot of hardship and ridicule during his life. He could have avoided persecution, abuse and even death on a cross. He could have let the powers of the world tell him how to be the Son of God.

But Jesus knows that the world is not as it should be. God does not want a world full of hungry children; God does not want a world where people continue to die from diseases of despair; God does not want a world ruled by [grandiose](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grandiose) fantasies of boundless success or power; and God does not want a world in which political leaders use their power for their own benefit.

Jesus knows that the world is not the way God wants it to be so he rejects the ways of the world and its attempt to define who he will be. Instead, Jesus will accept his role to serve others, listening for God’s word to him and trusting God to lead him on the right path.

The temptations that Jesus encountered are not his alone; … they are also the temptations of all God’s people …. The ways in which Jesus was tested symbolize all of the possibilities of doubt, misdirection, faithless choices and unholy distractions to which God’s people are ever at risk.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We succumb to temptation when we forget to whom we belong and strike out on our own instead, failing to recognize that God has already given us everything we need. For in our baptisms, we too have been claimed as God’s beloved, God’s children, and endowed with the worth that comes from knowing that we belong to and are loved by God.

There are so many temptations in this world, [Dear Friends], most of them coming not as apples hanging from a tree but rather subtle messages that seek to undermine our identity and invite us to forget whose we are. So many commercials suggest we are inadequate. So many headlines suggest that there is not enough to go around. And so many politicians – of all parties – contend that we have a great deal to fear. In the face of these identity-obscuring messages, we have the opportunity [this season] to root our[selves] in the same baptismal promise that safe-guarded and empowered Jesus. This is the baptismal promise that reminds us that God says we are so totally enough, that there is plenty to go around, and that we need not live in fear.

We belong to God.

Thanks be to God!

1. Barbara Brown Taylor, “Remaining Human” in the *The Christian Century*, February 7, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. David Lose, “Lent 1A: Identity as Gift and Promise” http://www.davidlose.net/2017/02/. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Thomas Long, *Matthew*, page 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)