

Know Your Truth  
First Sunday of Lent  
Sunday, March 9, 2014  
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11  
Elizabeth Mangham Lott  
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

When we were preparing to move from Richmond to New Orleans, I asked an artist friend of mine to create something special for my office. One of my favorite spaces in Richmond was the front porch of our century-old home. By day we painted with the children, drank cups of coffee, dead-headed petunias, and by night we gathered there often with friends, surrounded by candlelight. At some point I moved two plant stands near one another and stuck a salvaged board from our back alley between them. It became sort of a small coffee table and candle stand for years.

As we purged and sorted personal belongings before our big move, I recognized that the shabby chic, thrown together porch arrangement wouldn't travel with us to New Orleans, but I loved that board—worn and spotted with drops of candle wax. So I took the board to my friend Suzanne and asked her to create one of her popular “wisdom boards” on top of this worn out hunk of wood. Her wisdom work has phrases like “Dare to be brave”, “Be audacious”, and “Let it go.” She asked what I wanted this one to say, and I thought for a week or two before I settled on, “Know your truth.”

I had a vision for setting aside a space in my office with those words on that wood, candle wax and all, staring at me each day. I knew I would surround it with photographs and objects that represent seasons, stories, and experiences in my life that have contributed to my truest, best self. Because we do not always live as our best selves, we need to be surrounded with reminders of who we really are when we are living out of Truth.

To that end, we have two narratives before us this morning begging to be reminders of our truest selves; the first from the Garden as the freshly created woman has a conversation with the crafty snake, the second a scene of Jesus withdrawing to the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. Each scene calls to question matters of Truth. What is it that God has really said? Who is this God? Who are you, really? What is your true identity? What is your Source of Truth?

The Genesis story is the one commonly known as The Fall story. The woman and man have been told to enjoy everything available to them in the garden except for the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. So naturally, it is to this one tree that

their attention turns. The woman and the serpent engage in a conversation about limitation and freedom.

The serpent, more crafty and more shrewd than any other wild animal that God had made, begins the conversation with a question of God's words. What is it that God has really said? And what is it that God actually means by those words? How far could the woman stretch God's words? How far could the woman trust God's words? Was God hiding something from the people? Did this tree give them power that God was denying them? Would the fruit from the tree make their lives better? Which answer would secure the best life for the people—God's limits of protection or the full exercise of their freedom? These questions are our questions.

Next, we turn to a text we've studied around but not landed on until today. In Matthew, Jesus is baptized by John and immediately moves into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Matthew gives this as *the reason* that God's Spirit sends guides Jesus to an isolated place—to be tempted. The temptations for Jesus are of provision, self-preservation, and the promise of unlimited power. The opportunities imagined before Jesus are for him to create his own comfort and security at any cost. Jesus' wilderness story ends with Satan being sent away as Jesus repeatedly names God as his provider, his protector, and the object of his worship. These challenges are our challenges.

The same root questions of freedom and finitude exist in both stories—how free am I to create the circumstances of my life? How necessary is God in my story? Are there limits to my choices and actions? Who gets to decide what is True? These are questions that get at the essence of life and of sin.

My favorite study on sin comes from Mark Biddle. In his book *Missing the Mark*, he writes about humankind's calling to live into the fullness of our created selves—not beneath our humanity or above it but living into the height and breadth of who we are created to be. Biddle writes, "The individual's task is to struggle for authentic being. The individual is free to fashion his or her personhood; the individual is also free to fail to do so. This freedom cannot be refused or escaped. An individual chooses to act authentically or not. Inaction is itself inauthentic." It is the response to this struggle that "gives rise to sin when human beings inevitably resolve it incorrectly by seeking to secure their own existence, by seeking *to be apart from God*. The effort to be apart from the Ground of Being is inauthentic; it is sin."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Mark E. Biddle, *Missing the Mark: Sin and Its Consequences in Biblical Theology*, p. 7

The questions from today's texts invite us to consider our own efforts at living into the fullness of our humanity—are the choices and actions of our lives authentic or inauthentic. They invite introspection and honest self-reflection as we consider how we respond to all of the same questions and challenges that both the woman and Jesus faced. And they require us to tell the truth about our lives.

We have entered the Lenten season, a period of chosen wilderness. We can ignore what this season offers and go about our ordinary routines, or we can settle into the discomfort of wilderness. This can be a season of considering how we fail to live up to who God has created us to be and an opportunity to take on practices that move us closer to that self. It can also be a challenging time of looking honestly at the ways we overreach—the ways we attempt to be God for ourselves rather than trusting God to mysteriously and hiddenly protect us, provide for us, and guide us. In considering those overreaching ways, we will need to let go of unhealthy practices that limit God's presence in our lives.

The late Peter Gomes noted of today's gospel text that the allure of power and control offered by the devil came at Jesus steadily, again and again. Therefore, our Lenten experiences are not once-and-for-all in their conclusions. Gomes understood life's required persistence as a challenge, writing, "The devil's perseverance must be matched...by our own, and such perseverance in the spiritual wilderness is what the Lenten discipline is all about. The struggle with evil in the world begins with the struggle with evil within ourselves, and that struggle depends upon self-knowledge: knowing and acknowledging our limitations and our capacities. Such introspection should take place at all times with us, but Lent is that particular time in the church year when we pay attention to that process. As Jesus prepared himself for the discipline of his ministry by his time in the wilderness, we prepare ourselves once again for that ultimate renewal that comes to us and to the earth in Easter."<sup>2</sup>

We began our journey through Lent on Wednesday night with the mark of ashes—signs of life's fragility and limitations, reminders of our mortality. We continue the invitation into this season today with an invitation to the table. I invite you into the fullness that the next six weeks might offer. Settle into the questions, commit to the work of studying your life, and welcome the opportunity to know your truth.

---

<sup>2</sup> Peter J. Gomes, *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, p. 53