

The Seduction of Autonomy
(Genesis 2.15-17; 3.1-7) Matthew 4.1-11
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Lent 1A
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

Welcome to the season of Lent. Last Sunday we ended the liturgical season of Epiphany and the cultural season of Carnival with a long and loud time of worship with the world-renowned Dr. Michael White and the Original Liberty Jazz Band followed by days of parades and costumes and parties and celebration. Two Sundays ago, our last observance together of Epiphany, the communion table was covered with dozens of candles as we marked the end of that season of light together.

Throughout Epiphany, we held to the image of Christ as the great Light in the world's darkness, and we named and explored the implications for calling ourselves followers in the Jesus tradition. If Christ is the great Light, then how are we, as "little Christs" (the origin of the title Christian), called to also be Light? Now, after the brilliance and color and noise of Mardi Gras, we sit in a darker, quieter season of self-examination.

However, this year I want us to focus as a congregation not on a heaviness or darkness in these weeks but instead on the Lightness of Lent. How might Lent be an invitation to lightness? A clarifying time of identity. An invitation to release everything that isn't really you. A time of asking ourselves: What is weighing us down, making us heavy, limiting our individual lives and our collective life together? What needs to be released and "lightened" within us that we can be who we were meant to be in the first place? How might we release some spiritual and mental and metaphorical and even physical heaviness so that we are lighter and light-filled when the dawn of Easter comes?

I invite you to find hope and possibility in this season of self-examination, particularly in the scripture we explore together from now into early April. We begin with Jesus' time in the wilderness. With a setting like the wilderness and a hiking partner like the devil, we automatically begin to listen with a negative ear and maybe a skeptical ear, too. It's a cartoon. It's the devil on the left shoulder and the angel on the right. We dismiss the story as a feat of strength that only Jesus himself could withstand, and perhaps we begin to dust ourselves with a little shame and guilt thinking of all the times we haven't been able to withstand lesser temptations.

Quiet the shame. Quiet the guilt. Quiet the skepticism. Hear this story in the framework of the Lightness of Lent as we ask the same questions of the text as we are asking of ourselves. What is being released and lightened in this story? How is this mystical encounter in the wild, far off place better enabling Jesus to be who he was meant to be in the first place? How is this a clarifying time of identity for Jesus? The wilderness is a place of discernment, and if he welcomes it rightly, Jesus will leave lighter than he entered not because he resisted turning the stones to bread but because he let go of everything that he isn't.

Eugene Peterson takes a different angle in his robust exploration of this scene in his book *The Jesus Way*, working first with the assumption that Jesus is quite clear on exactly who he is because of the previous naming and blessing scene of Jesus' baptism. Peterson focuses not on the identity of Jesus but the methods of living out that identity, observing, "Apparently there are wrong ways to be on 'the way of the Lord.'"¹

"Who [Jesus] was needed no letters of reference...But *how* would he go about this messianic work...*This* needs to be looked at closely..." and then the same questions must be turned on us. "Who we are and what we are to do [may be] clear enough. But how will we do it? What ways will we use?"²

The thing is: we are most accustomed to ways that are not Jesus' ways. We're shaped by our family way, our New Orleans way, our professional way, our American way. But in the wilderness time of reflection and questioning, or "in the clear desert air" of the wilderness, "discernments take place. We discern illusion behind the mask of goodness. We discern lies woven into the fine rhetoric of the pursuit of happiness. We discern incongruities between pretense and performance. We discern a disorienting extravagance in a promise that, like a bright light, dazzles us, temporarily blinding us to the details involved in our dailiness."

Right now we are in "Wilderness time. Desert time. Time to see the way of Jesus tested against the devil's way. Time to feel the terrible pull of temptation away from the way of Jesus and realize that it is a temptation, as all temptation is, to embrace illusion, to believe a lie."

The root temptation before Jesus in the wilderness is the same before the first man and woman in the Genesis story. This is the seduction of autonomy—the illusion of control,

¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, p. 29

² quotes throughout: Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way*, "Temptation", pp. 28-36

the siren song of individuation, the Frank Sinatra impulse to do it my way, The three-year-old's mantra to do it myself. Maybe we Americans are particularly wired for this temptation, but it is one that spans age, geography, and time. We think that we can do life alone. And truer than that: we think that if we could actually do life alone, then we might finally do life "right." (If only I called the shots. If only they'd listen to me. If only they'd get out of my way and let me do it. If only x, then most certainly outcome y.)

In the Jesus story:

1. It starts with fasting and turning stones to loaves of bread. Meet your immediate needs with a flash of power and imagine the other needs you could snap your fingers and meet. What questions of method and identity are wrapped up in this invitation? The temptation to deal with my needs first and then distantly address the needs of others, suggests Peterson. If he can snap his fingers and solve any problem of discomfort and hunger, then his relationship to others is reduced to task of merely meeting needs. Matthew has just told us this is the beloved son of God on whom God's pleasure rests. Surely he could snap his fingers and meet the world's great needs. But a shortcut that eliminates relationship and community response isn't the Jesus way.
2. The scene flashes, and now they're on a high point of the temple. Prove yourself, the tempter taunts. Make a scene. Make a splash. Imagine the followers who will flock to you when you put on a good show for them because you and I know that the angels will catch you in dramatic fashion. And you and I know that the people make all kinds of pledges of loyalty to a good entertainer. Peterson calls this "The temptation to embark on a circus career...providing cheap diversions and borrowed ecstasies." Beware the entertainer. Beware the flash in the pan. The Jesus Way is slow and steady, puts down roots, stays a while in a place. "The Way of Jesus is not a sequence of exceptions to the ordinary, but a way of living deeply and fully with the people here and now, in the place we find ourselves."
3. The scene flashes once more, and the whole world is before Jesus. More than the classic "deal with the devil" opportunity, Jesus is again being offered a way to gain the world's attention and meet the world's needs on the quick and easy track. You can do this all by yourself right now, Jesus. This temptation gives Jesus the opportunity to create a world "perfect in functions, but with no personal relations." The world is hurting, the systems are broken, so FIX IT Jesus. But the Jesus Way is not one of impersonal, nameless rule. Peterson references Ghandi's criticism of "dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good." And Jesus is calling us all to the goodness of God, not forcing us into a system of perfection that

bends us to a particular will. No, "Jesus refuses to do good things in the wrong way." The Jesus Way is slow and communal, and the work of repairing the world is ours together to do.

The temptations laid before Jesus are not to bad ends but are deviations from the Way God lays out before us in the life and love of Jesus. The temptation is to "a way that is depersonalized, carried out without love or intimacy or participation, [and this way] is not, no matter how well we do it, no matter how much good is accomplished, the Jesus Way." There will be no snapping of fingers. There will be no showy performance. There will be no political revolution that makes a new empire out of the old one. There will be long tables with plenty of food and lots of good wine. There will be the slow and messy work of relationships. There will be invitations that go ignored and disgruntled friends who walk away sad. There will be laughter and tears and shock and silence. Minds and hearts will open and expand. Boundaries will be erased and circles made wider. It will take time, but God doesn't seem to be in too much of a hurry. The Jesus Way welcomes each and every one of us to participate in the remaking of the whole world, and Jesus won't succumb to temptation to snap his fingers and do it all for us. He will do the slow and heartbreaking work of living with us and showing us how big and wide and high and deep the love of God is, even if it kills him.

"It is the temptation to be self-sufficient, to establish their identity on their own, that seduces the first humans," writes David Lose. "Identity is again the focus of the Tempter in the scene of Jesus' temptation. 'If you are the Son of God,' Satan begins... Hence the core of the temptation: 'Wouldn't it be better to know for certain? Turn stone to bread, jump from the Temple, worship me...and you will never know doubt again...You will be sufficient on your own.'" As it turns out, Jesus can't live out his way alone, and neither can we. "Rather, to be human," Lose continues, "is to accept that we are, finally, created for relationship with God and with each other. Perhaps the goal of the life of faith isn't to escape limitation but to discover God amid our needs."³

You are invited into this story today. You are invited to release the illusion that you can do this life alone. You are invited into the slow and steady work of God. You are invited into the love and laughter and tears and silence of community. You are invited to discover just how big and wide and high and deep the love of God is. You are invited to the feasting table at which there is always another seat. And always enough food and always enough drink. You are not alone here, and it turns out that is the whole point. You are invited. Won't you come?

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=902