

**March 1, 2020 First Sunday in Lent**  
**Pastor Carolyn Albert Donovan**  
**Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas**

**GOSPEL**

**Matthew 4:1-11**

The holy gospel according to Saint Matthew, the fourth chapter.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

<sup>1</sup>Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup>He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. <sup>3</sup>The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” <sup>4</sup>But he answered, “It is written,

‘One does not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ ”

<sup>5</sup>Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup>saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,’  
and ‘On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’ ”

<sup>7</sup>Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ”

<sup>8</sup>Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; <sup>9</sup>and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” <sup>10</sup>Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.’ ”

<sup>11</sup>Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

The gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

Today, having just embarked on our Lenten journey,  
we hear from Scripture...of two temptations...  
maybe even two tempters...  
(We usually think of them as the same person...  
but Scripture doesn't exactly say that).

These two stories are so very different and yet also very much the same.

Boiled down to its essence,  
the temptations are all one lie,  
that shape-shifts into different forms...  
The lie underneath all these temptations in Scripture today...  
and the temptations in so many of our lives,  
are something like a whisper that says:  
"You aren't what you could be...  
but you can take it for yourself and make it true..."

The Serpent suggests this –  
pointing out the limits of human knowledge of good and evil.  
But all they have to do is reach out and take a bite, he says.  
The Tempter comes at Jesus again and again with possibilities...  
power and safety and comfort...that would be so easy for Jesus to claim...  
All he has to do is say the word and take it easy, he says.

Crafty...

That is how the translators bring us the Hebrew word *arum*.  
(And I am grateful to Rev. Dr. Joy J. Moore for this insight,  
because my Hebrew is...how shall I say it...remedial, at best.)  
That word...or at least one that sounds just like it  
actually appears in another part of this story in another place, though.  
At the end...when the first humans leave the garden,  
they are ashamed because they are *arum*...

which there means naked.

Craftiness...and nakedness...*arum*...

Makes me wonder: what could they have to do with each other?

Maybe it could be that craftiness comes in revealing a little bit of truth...

just enough to make you wonder if you really saw it...

something better...just out of reach...

It's a tease.

The craftiest ones know just how much to reveal,

just how vulnerable to be...

just what sleight of hand will draw us in.

But then, when we have crossed over to that place,

fallen for the trick, been taken in...

we don't find satisfaction...

We find shame.

On the other side of temptation, it is us who feel exposed,

and we wish we could just disappear, shrink into nothing.

Shame is perhaps, more than anything,

the feeling of having shown who we are

just at the moment that we've been told

that who we are is bad or wrong or...maybe worst of all...

just not worth seeing at all.

It's Lucy pulling the football away once she convinces Charlie Brown to kick.

It's everyone counting to three at the edge of the pool

but staying back to let you jump in alone.

Craftiness tricks you into trusting...and then leaves you alone and exposed.

But when Jesus is taken to the wilderness just after being baptized,

the crafty one, the Tempter who comes out to meet him

doesn't find one who is easily tricked or taken in.

Jesus calls out his temptation for what it really is.

He calls off the tease, and cuts right to the naked truth  
that there is nothing that he can reach out to take that isn't already his...  
that he is already who he is supposed to be...  
and he will not be shamed for being hungry or tired  
or seeming powerless...  
or for knowing that he is the Son of God.  
Just because the Tempter doesn't recognize Jesus  
doesn't make him any less who he is.

Now these stories - the temptation of the first humans  
and the temptation of Jesus  
are often looked at side by side as a sort of set of examples –  
one way to do it wrong and one way to do it right.  
But I don't think that reading the Scriptures in that way really helps us.  
What we need so much in the face of the Tempter's voice in our lives  
is to witness God's answer to his lies...  
to hear the truth that is so hard to believe for ourselves...

And the truth, from the garden to this moment, is this:  
God is not holding out on you.  
You are created in the image of God.  
You don't have to take it or make it for yourself  
or hide behind an image that seems better than who you really are.  
Because who you really are is the image of the Creator of the Universe.  
You have what you need...  
because it's been part of you from the beginning of time...

You are enough... Jesus knows this, and shows us this...  
when we can't believe it for ourselves.

And I don't think God blames us  
when we can't find how to live in the light of that truth.

I don't think Adam and Eve's story...  
or any story God tells us is meant to multiply our shame.

It's meant to multiply our hope.

It's not to teach us how to be a better victim of temptation...  
how to answer like Jesus instead of like Adam and Eve.

If we read this story looking for how to be the perfect victim of temptation,  
we will fall into the same shame trap that captures us so often.

You don't have to be the perfect victim –  
to respond in every exact right way when you are attacked or tempted.  
Because the attacker is the one who creates the wrong...the brokenness...  
The fact that you got hurt or caught in it is their responsibility first.

I think we skip over this part of the story  
in our eagerness to figure out how to do what is right.  
(And don't get me wrong...it is important to try to do what is right, too.)

But it is also always true that the Tempter is in the wrong.  
The Tempter is the one who is working against the purposes of God.  
We get caught up in it sometimes...  
but the Tempter is still the original sinner, if you ask me...  
(not Eve, and not Adam...The original sin was the serpent's...)

The story of temptation is ripe with opportunities to multiply our shame  
around when we are broken, hurt, not strong enough to escape evil.

And there may be no better time  
than the week of the first sentencing of Harvey Weinstein  
to say in no uncertain terms...

You don't have to be a perfect victim for it to be wrong that someone hurt you.  
That kind of shame is part of the Tempter's game,  
and God wants nothing to do with it.

We still have hard and heavy work ahead of us, of course.

Including the work of trying to do the next right thing  
at each fork in the road.

It's still going to be difficult...no doubt about that...

Jesus went from Baptism to 40 days without food or water...  
and his journey isn't about to get much easier.

Sometimes it will be hard, and the world

will try to strip away our belief in our God-given goodness.

It might even succeed... in taking our belief...for a time.

But it can't take away the truth of who you are.

It couldn't take that truth from Jesus...and because of Jesus...  
it can't take it from you.

You are a divinely created child of God...

and you have been named and claimed

by the one who knows the truth

even in the face of the most powerful temptations and lies  
the world can offer.

And even if we can't face them down, he can, and he does...

He goes out to that desert place so we know

that we don't have to answer the Tempter alone.

And beyond the craftiness of it all and our nakedness in the face of it...

beyond the shame that is put onto us...

there is so much life to live...so much important work to do.

Children of God,

don't believe the Tempter who says you aren't enough already.

You don't have to take what is already yours.

But you do get to use it.

Children of God, let us practice living in love and not in shame.

Let us repeat to one another as often as we need to hear it  
that we are beloved of God.

And let's live in this whole beloved world

out of the kind of fierce love that is going ahead of us now to the cross.

The tempters can get stuffed.

We've got more important things to do than listen to their lies.

And they can't have our hope or our joy...because Jesus gave it to us.

And we are his.

Thanks be to God. Amen.