

Old Testament lesson – Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
New Testament lesson – Matthew 4:1-11

Hidden Temptations

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Many people observe the practice of giving up some luxury or pleasure during this period of time leading up to Holy Week and Easter. Chocolate is a common item that people give up. That is why chocolate candy is so popular for Easter baskets. Once Easter arrives, Lent is over and people can eat chocolate.

“Hidden Temptations” sounds a bit like a chocolate treat with a name designed to lure someone away from their Lenten fast of chocolate. That’s not what it is. Personally I don’t need such a temptation. I don’t give up chocolate. The bathroom scale tells me I should, but I pay it scant attention in this matter.

Both Scripture lessons today highlight temptations, but there are some which are not obvious. Hence the sermon title.

Looking at our OT lesson, it is a well-known story. Of course, there are probably lots of misunderstandings about it, perhaps because it is the subject of so many jokes. But the story is fairly straightforward. The serpent tempts Eve, she eats the forbidden fruit – not an apple, by the way – and then she talks Adam into eating. They realize they are naked and make clothing out of fig leaves.

God discovers this and proceeds to question Adam. He blames it on the woman, whom God gave him, by the way. Eve blames the serpent, and of course, the snake didn’t have a leg to stand on. See what I mean about the jokes?

There is at least one very important assumption we have to make in order for the story to work at all. God gave the commandment not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil *before* he created the woman. So we must assume that he *repeated* the commandment after Eve was on the scene. Otherwise, she could simply be guilty of misunderstanding *Adam*, or he could be guilty of not relaying the commandment exactly as God gave it.

People have made a great deal about why the serpent approached Eve instead of Adam. Was

she the weak link? Was she more easily tempted? Would it be easier for her to convince Adam than for Adam to convince her? We can not really say, and any explanations are really just speculation.

However, there is something interesting in her response to the serpent. She adds something that was not in the original instruction. She tells the serpent that God said not even to touch that tree. Did God add this command to the original when he told Eve? Or did Adam add it to emphasize the danger presented by the tree? Or did she just make it up?

When the snake first tempts Eve we find him ascribing to God restrictions never mentioned by God. He implies that God told them not to eat of *any tree of the garden*. Eve corrects him, but the snake has already planted a thought in her head: God is too restrictive.

So now when the snake says outright that God lied to them, perhaps she has already begun to embrace the notion that God is too restrictive. “You’re not going to die.” It turns out the snake was right about that, but he was also wrong.

He was right, because the fruit was not poison; Adam and Eve did not physically die as soon as they ate the fruit. But God knew they had eaten it, and the relationship between Creator and the created was broken, and that was a spiritual death. And every human being in the history of the world has suffered that separation from God.

At some point the snake must have pointed out to Eve how nice the fruit looked. She saw it was good for food, a delight to the eyes. Perhaps she had never even looked at it, afraid that if she even touched it she would die. But now she looked at it, and it looked good.

And the serpent had encouraged her to go further. Not only should she look at it and see how good it was, she should eat some and have her eyes opened even further. She should become wise on her own. She should be like God! Wouldn’t that be a good thing, to be wise and be like God?

Don't we think we should become wise and be like Jesus? Isn't that all Eve was doing?

I used to think that. It sometimes occurred to me that the whole Garden of Eden scenario was a little unfair. God put a perfectly good fruit tree in

But this was sort of a test of the three-way relationship between God and Adam and Eve. It was not an equal partnership; God was in charge. The humans were supposed to trust him. They were supposed to believe him and obey him. They failed at all of that.

There was more temptation present here than the mere temptation to break a rule. The serpent tempted Eve and, in turn, Adam to disbelieve God. He tempted them to violate the faith they should have had in God.

A few millennia later, he was still trying that tactic. This time, however, he was trying it with a different man, one who would prove to be more obedient to God and resistant to temptation. But this time the devil – and after all, we now know that's what the serpent was – this time the devil also had more material to work with.

He probably thought the old food temptation would be a cinch. Jesus had been fasting in the wilderness for *forty days and forty nights!* Matthew tells us he was hungry. Well, no kidding, Captain Obvious!

Wait a minute – not so fast. Yes, that would seem obvious, so why mention it? Matthew is dealing with a hidden temptation here. There is a temptation to think that Jesus would *not* have been hungry because he was not really human. He was God in human *form*, but he was not really human. This was an early heresy known as docetism: Jesus appeared human, but he was not truly subject to all the feelings and experiences of real human beings.

Even if that particular heresy was not around yet officially, Matthew nevertheless says it is hogwash to entertain such a notion. There might have been some people who already thought that way by the time Mathew wrote down his gospel account. So he tells us that Jesus most certainly was human, and he most certainly was hungry after forty days without food. So the temptation

the midst of the garden, a tree that was good for food and delightful to look at, and then he said not to eat it. No one in their right mind plants a fruit tree and then doesn't eat the fruit if it's good.

to make bread out of stones was real. I suppose he could have taken some rocky ground and made stone-ground bread.

But Jesus knows who he is. He knows he does not have to prove his identity by making bread out of rocks. Instead he affirms his identity as the Son of God by demonstrating his obedience to God. He points out that real life is more than mere physical existence. Just as death in the Garden of Eden was not just physical death, life for Jesus does not consist only in providing food for his physical body.

It is still a great temptation for people today to think of life only in physical terms. Our actions betray that thought constantly. We focus a much greater part of our life on the physical aspects than we do on spiritual aspects. We work, we cook and clean, we build things, take care of houses and yards and cars. Even some church activities are not very spiritual. If someone asked if we prayed much at Family Fun Night, our response might be, "No not really. It was just for fun."

Too often, we don't think of spiritual activities like prayer and Bible study and evangelism as fun. Maybe we enjoy those things, but we don't want to get carried away with them. We want to have fun. We want to live life and have fun.

We have given in to a temptation hidden in plain sight. We think of life in physical terms, and we put spiritual or religious things off in a separate compartment.

After his failure at the first temptation the devil took a new approach. He was somehow able to take Jesus to Jerusalem. From this it would seem that the Father had given Jesus into the devil's hand for God's purpose of training and testing, to demonstrate Jesus' obedience, and perhaps to give the devil a little foretaste of his ultimate defeat.

But now instead of tempting Jesus to show his power, he tempts him to try to prove God's love for him. He dares Jesus to put God's love and care to a test. "Jump down from this high point and see if God will send angels to protect and care for you." But, if you'll pardon the pun, Jesus did not fall for it. Again, he was certain of who he was, and he was certain of the Father's love for him. Perhaps it was just as important

So here is another hidden temptation exposed. It is tempting to think in the midst of difficulties that if God really loved us, he would send angels or somehow help us out of the difficulty. As I look back on such times in my life, it occurs to me that God was often helping me in ways I did not recognize. At times he helped me by causing a difficulty that took me in a different and better direction. I think I might have mentioned a time or two the bullets I dodged when some girl broke my heart by dumping me. At the time it did not seem like God cared for me, but he cared for me more than I realized.

Finally, the devil decided to tempt Jesus to cash in on his identity as the Son of God. He offers to give Jesus power over all the kingdoms of the world. I suppose there is some disagreement over whether the devil could make this offer. People point out the world is God's; he made it. On the other hand, Jesus did refer to the devil as "the ruler of this world." So perhaps it was within his power to offer this to Jesus.

At any rate, Jesus turns down the offer. The price is too high for Jesus, because the devil demanded to have Jesus worship and serve him instead of God. Did the devil think Jesus did not know that eventually God would reclaim his world and cast out the devil? Therefore the devil was trying to use a temporary rule over the world to tempt Jesus away from the eternal rule of the world which God will give to him. What a rotten deal it would have been.

Of course, if Jesus had begun ruling the world at that point in time, perhaps we would have avoided all kinds of wars and famines and diseases and so on. But the world still would have been dead, for it would have still been separated from God by sin. And with that understanding, we realize we have come full

that Jesus knew of God's love for the human race. That's what was behind this whole project: being born in human form, being baptized when he did not need to repent of any sins committed, this temptation in the desert, his later suffering and death. All of it was happening so that God's love would become apparent to any person who would look carefully and with an open mind.

circle back to the devil trying to substitute a shallow physical version of life for the deep spiritual life we can live when we have a personal relationship with God.

Every temptation hides that basic temptation within or behind it: the temptation to abandon our relationship with God, if only for a moment, thinking we can lay hold of some enjoyable aspect of physical life. It may be gluttony or greed, or lust or covetousness. We may be tempted to steal or lie or gossip or injure someone. We may be tempted to use the name of God or of Jesus in vain, as a swear word.

But at the heart of every temptation, something is saying to us, "Where's the harm? It won't kill you."

But every sin, every surrender to temptation, is like that first one in the Garden. It betrays a lack of trust in God. Every sin proclaims our belief that we know what is best for us at that moment in time. At that moment in time, we think we are wise, knowing what is good.

But we're wrong. A sin may seem good to us, but eventually the Holy Spirit will break in and remind us that what we did or said, or maybe just thought, was actually wrong. It was sin.

But at this point we can be thankful that we are more blessed than Adam and Eve. When we sin, we know that God still loves us. We know that he sent his Son Jesus to resist all temptation and to give his sinless life for us. We know that the death we have just suffered – again – because of sin, can be quickly remedied. We are forgiven as quickly as we confess our sin as exactly that: sin.

We don't restore our relationship with God by twisting a Scripture in some way to justify the sin. That is the devil's tactic, as seen in our NT

lesson. Over the years, I have heard so-called Christians justify sins with the most outrageous distortions of Scripture, defending everything from domestic abuse to adultery to greed to

It is always better to admit sins to God and not try to defend them. It did not work for Adam and Eve; it won't work for us.

Temptation can be hidden from us, but sin can not be hidden from God. Luther once wrote that Christians should love God and sin boldly. By that he did not mean to encourage sin. He meant that if you want real forgiveness your sins must be acknowledged. Sin can not be hidden, so before God, boldly acknowledge them so that

sexual perversion to war to tax evasion, to name just a few. And you know what? All those sins were still sins.

they can be forgiven.

Beware of hidden temptation, as well as the obvious temptation. But in every case of sin, be boldly confident in God's grace. No sin can separate you from God for long, so long as you acknowledge it and receive forgiveness. Temptation may hide and surprise us, but God's grace and mercy are always right there in the open. Amen.