

**Year A, Lent 1**

**March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

**By Thomas L. Truby**

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

### **Fighting Through the Lies and Claiming the Truth**

“The snake was the most intelligent of all the wild animals that the LORD GOD had made.” He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” He knew how to wedel his way into her thinking. Eve cheerfully replies, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden but not the one in the middle, we can’t even touch it, and if we do we will die.” Notice she stretched it just a bit in her report to the crafty one. God never said anything about touching it. Was she just a little fascinated by that tree already?

With a dismissive smirk the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Do you see what he is doing? He is suggesting that the reason God told them they can’t eat from that tree was his rivalry with them. He doesn’t want them to be as powerful as he is and if they eat that apple they will be. The clever one suggests they are foolish for trusting God when they themselves could be God.

And being like God and knowing good and evil; what could be bad about that. If we know the difference between good and evil we can choose the one and avoid the other. Maybe the death threat was just a way of keeping them ignorant and off the track.

So she picked the apple and took a bite and Adam saw her and he wanted it too. He imitated her desire. It was his imitation of her desire that started the contagion that has infected humans ever since. Now we are all sensing emptiness in ourselves when we see what the other has or we think they have and we want it. According to the Genesis account, this was the first instance of a person imitating another person rather than imitating God.

At that moment their eyes are opened and they see they are naked. Suddenly they are self-conscious, aware of themselves in comparison to the other, ashamed and in rivalry. Now they see themselves through the eye of the other, leave innocence and paradise and enter the world of “keeping up with the Jones.” Each human wants the apple the other has or they think he has and each thinks that if he had it then he would be whole, complete, at peace and self-sufficient; like God. And so we chase after each other, envy each other, fight with each other, and exhaust ourselves in the scramble.

As the story goes on the rivalry spreads through the generations and Cain, their son who was a farmer, kills Abel, their other son who was a herder of sheep. Now remember this is a story meant to convey truth not factual history. Cain thinks God loves Abel more and kills Abel in a fit of jealousy. Cain acts on the knowledge of good and evil and Abel is evil in Cain's eye. The knowledge of good and evil has brought death because we each think we are good and the other evil.

Abel's blood cries out from the ground seeking revenge. Already the Bible knows Abel is innocent. No mythology here to hide the violence. It's just violence calling for more violence. And so the cycle of violence begins. How will it be interrupted?

We move to the gospels. "Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him." Jesus says he desires to do the will of his father but his resolve must be tested and the devil, another name for mimetic contagion, can't wait to test him. "After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was starving. The tempter came to him and said, "Since you are God's Son, command these stones to become bread.'" The devil starts by attacking Jesus' identity and wants Jesus to stop listening to God and listen to him instead. Your starving; turn these stones into bread. You can do that if you are God's Son. If he uses this kind of power, will he be fully human? I don't think so.

Which way will Jesus choose, raw power where he gets what he wants right now or the fully human way of faithfulness to God leading to the cross and the message of forgiveness? Though he has not eaten for 40 days, the number of days in Lent, he responds with, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" He desires the will of God more than the sensation of hunger and passes his first test. Jesus, the new Adam, trusts his Abba and in that act becomes our bread of life, the one who feeds us his broken body.

The clever one next takes him to the holy city and places him on the pinnacle of the temple. The devil tells him to throw himself down since God will protect him. And I believe God would have if he had jumped. But if he is invulnerable how can he be fully human and if he is not fully human, how can he show us how to live as vulnerable human beings?

Listening to any voice other than God's will remove Jesus from his chosen path. "Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" For a second time Jesus listens to God rather than any human voice in rivalry with God. Even in his vulnerability Jesus will trust God; even if it means dying on a cross at the hands of humanity. In doing this he makes himself our new temple; the place where the human and the divine non-violently meet (Remember the original temple was a place of great violence. Thousands of creatures were killed.).

Finally “the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.” Pure power over the entire world; everyone saying your name and lauding you, how tempting is that. The devil said it will be yours if you will worship me. Accuse people, deceive them, manipulate them, use irresistible force and you can rule the world. Everyone will bow down to you in fear or admiration if you bow down to me, says the devil, that embodiment of finger pointing that controls the world. Jesus knows that even if the devil is right, this is not his father’s way and the devil is on his way out. Jesus will lose his life to the hate the devil models but his resurrection will be the event that will send the devil packing.

How did Jesus manage to succeed where Adam and Eve failed? Jesus kept his focus on doing the will of his father. His strong desire for God protected him from falling victim to a lie.

Friday night’s PBS Newshour had a segment on how millennials don’t go to church but are finding church in new forms. The spokesperson for them was a young Harvard professor, himself a millennial. He said they were developing church by a different name because they cared for each other and they regularly met to form community. I agree that these are important functions of a church but there is one more he didn’t mention. His church had no vertical dimension, it was all horizontal, no transcendence before which they all stood, no God beyond them all who would pull them out of their rivalry. The only voices heard in their community were their own. Whose voice among them will they listen to and how will they decide on the truth? Jesus’ deepest desire was to listen to the voice of God who comes from beyond the realm of competing human voices and that’s what protected Jesus from being drawn into the lies of the devil, or mimetic contagion. With no vertical dimension, no Jesus who saves from each other, who protects us from seductive lies and vicious rivalries for power?

In Lent we fight through the lies and more deeply claim the vertical dimension; Jesus who died on the cross and rose again on Easter morning. Amen.