

Sunday, March 13, 2011
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon

Oh how easily seeds of doubt can be sown.

With just one small comment everything that you believe to be true can be called into question.

Have you ever had the experience where someone challenged something that you believed and you realized that your belief was diminished?

Words have such tremendous power in our lives.

"You will be like God, knowing good and evil," the serpent teased.

I wonder if Adam and Eve were even conscious that they were not like God. Was that something they had talked about, or worried about?

The serpent, slyly planted that seed of doubt.

All of a sudden, Adam and Eve were aware that they could have more than they had.

More knowledge, more power.

Their humanness took over and their sense of well-being eroded.

The serpent is alive and well and living in the year 2011.

We can examine our own lives and find sources that tempt us by appealing to our concern for personal well-being, personal power, or even the wish to be like God.

Just when we think we are fine someone or something plants that seed of doubt.

We can easily be led astray – with just a word – just an idea, just a “really, are you sure?”

Our teenagers are perhaps the most vulnerable to this when they reach the stage of questioning what their parents have told them.

Following the rules, obedience, becomes questionable.

They begin to ask themselves “What would happen if I didn’t do what I am supposed to?”

Teens, or really any of us, often tend to think that the rules are primarily for other people – not us.

We like to think that outcomes are predictable, but of course they rarely are.

We like to think that we can trump the odds, but we usually don’t

We like to imagine that our own experience is different than the conventional wisdom.

We like to think that even though smoking or drinking or overeating are bad for us, that we won’t be plagued with illness or disease.

We like to think that if we only cheat a little, it is not really cheating.

We like to think that if we only use violence for a just war, it is not killing.

We like to think that we are not sinners, but we are.

Just like Adam and Eve, we like to think that we can play God.

We can not.

In today’s readings we have two stories of temptation with two very different responses.

Like Adam and Eve in the Garden, the wilderness becomes, for Jesus, the place where questions seek to undermine his trust and obedience.

“If you are the son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”

Even in the midst of the silence and hunger of the wilderness, Jesus however, remained tuned to a different voice.

He heard and responded with the scriptures and their collective witness to the Word and promise of God.

He heard scripture’s call to love God with all one's heart, mind and strength.

When the voices that question and would lead us astray threaten to overpower us, it is then that we must return to the promises of God.

A return to the faithful witness of the scriptures has the power to lead us back again to obedience and trust.

A return to God’s promise strengthens us against temptations.

Our lives are full of such moments when we are challenged to stand strong in our faith.

The biggest challenge of obedience and trust is that God, in creating us, granted us free will.

So, we are not God, but we are responsible for our choices.

Sometimes we picture the Garden of Eden as a perfect place, a vacation paradise perhaps.

But we forget that God placed the man in the garden "to till it and to keep it."

While there is great freedom for the humans, the garden also contains one boundary that restricts them.

Adam and Eve are faced with a number of choices – how to care for the land, what to eat, how to interact with the other creatures.

They make a distinct choice to enter into conversation with the serpent.

They make a deliberate decision to pick the forbidden fruit and taste it.

They exercise their free will, giving into temptation willingly.

Jesus, on the other hand, resists temptation in the wilderness.

Our lives, just like theirs, are a series of choices.

We are always assessing, discerning, deciding.

During this Lenten season we have an opportunity to clarify how we make decisions and to whose voice we respond, God or the serpent.

A number of years ago, when my sons were approaching adolescence, I wrote a small book for them, outlining the values that I hoped they would embrace.

As a part of that project I developed for them the “Choices Checklist.”

This was a series of questions that I wanted them to ask themselves before they made any decisions.

While the initial list was designed to help the boys resist anticipated peer pressure during adolescence – when I revisited it this week I found it to be applicable to our own adult efforts to resist temptation.

So I pass it on to you with some additions:

“Before any decision is made, ask yourself the following questions:

Would I do this if my parents were here *or anyone was watching?*

Will anyone be hurt from this action?

Will I potentially be hurt from this action?

Do I have all the facts I need to make this decision?

Do I understand all of the potential consequences of this decision?

If my friend (*or child*) were making this decision, what would my advice be?

Does this action reflect my values?

Am I clear on what my values are...what is really important to me?

What if I don't do this? What will happen then?

What is the worst thing that can happen in this situation?

What is the best thing that can come from this situation?

Do I feel comfortable? Certain?

Do I have to make this decision right now? Can it wait?

Should I talk with someone about this? (How about Mom?)

I would add (*How about God?*)

I can't help but wonder if Adam and Eve would have had a different outcome if they had consulted the "Choices Checklist."

Probably not, just as my sons did not completely avoid making any mistakes in judgment by having the list at hand.

You see, I think that the Genesis story is less about explaining the origin of sin and more about describing the reality of what it is to be human.

One writer noted "our mysterious human tendencies continually to rebel against God, to resist the gracious boundaries and limitations that God places around us for our own good, and to desire to be like God rather than thankful creatures of God."

The reality, my dear friends, is that we are human.

We are so human.

As the apostle Paul says, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

The bible exists to teach us how to interact with God, but also to comfort us knowing that our God offers mercy, forgiveness and grace.

The messages are clear – we simply must take them in, write them on our hearts.

From the Adam and Eve story we learn that long-term consequences often outweigh immediate gratification.

We learn that seeking power beyond ourselves can be dangerous.

We learn that if we put our lives in God's hands He will care for us, but if we try to take control ourselves, the possibility of failure is great.

From Jesus' experience in the wilderness we learn that we can resist temptation by putting our faith in God.

We learn that God will be with us through our most difficult trials and tribulations.

We learn that we can overcome temptation with a strong will and a deep faith.

Lent is the season where we work to strengthen ourselves internally so that we can meet those external challenges.

Adam's story reminds us that the action of one man can change the entire world.

From Jesus' story we know that indeed one man did change the whole world.

As we begin our Lenten journey let us reflect on what each one of us can do to change our world, both individually and communally.

As we turn inward to reflect on our own relationships with God, let us do so with the goal of strengthening our resolve against temptation, relying on God's grace to help us be all that God created us to be.

This week, choose God.

Amen.