

The Opposite of Temptation

a sermon on Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11

by Nancy Raca, Covenant United Methodist Church, March 5, 2017 (Lent 1)

We are now 64 days into the new year. 64 days! How are those new year's resolutions holding up? I guess mine went out the window, oh, about 63 days ago.

I don't know why I'm so bad at keeping new year's resolutions. Maybe it's because January 1st seems to me like an arbitrary date to choose to make life changes. Maybe it's because I just don't have any willpower.

And now it's the first week of Lent – the beginning of a 40-day period of self-examination, reflection, and self-denial. I'm wondering if the ancient church fathers decided to put Lent in the early Spring because they knew we would have already ditched our new year's resolutions and they thought they'd give us another chance...

You've all heard, I imagine, of the idea of "giving something up" for Lent. Meat, chocolate, alcohol, Facebook....and even sacrifices of a more spiritual nature – like giving up resentment, grudges, envy, or self-doubt.

No matter what you believe would make a positive change in your life – whether it's abstinence from ice cream or relinquishing negative emotions – you can bet that, over the next 40 days, there are going to be plenty of chances to stumble. There is always going to be temptation – that seductive call of "just once" or "why not?" or "I can't help it..."

So that's why I feel that today's Scriptures are so appropriate for the beginning of Lent. In our Old Testament passage, we see a woman tempted to eat a forbidden fruit. In the Gospel reading, we see Jesus tempted by the devil. What can we learn from these two experiences?

Let's look at the woman in the garden, whom we know as Eve. Eve and her husband Adam live in Eden, a place of abundance and beauty. God invites them to eat their fill from all the trees in the garden – except one. According to God, the fruit of this one tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, is deadly. Into our story enters the snake, who introduces a seed of doubt – is the fruit from that tree really off-limits?

Eve puts up a little resistance, but she ultimately gives in. She sees that the tree is beautiful, and the fruit is delicious! She seems to believe that this fruit can satisfy a craving she has – a craving for wisdom and knowledge. How bad can that be? And so she takes the fruit, and eats it, and gives some to her husband as well.

Let's think about this in a real-world context....

Some of you may know that I have a gumball machine in my office. And that gumball machine has M&Ms in it. Having that M&M machine next to my desk is pretty much the opposite of what I need in order to support my goal of living a healthy and fit

life. But that's ok, right? Because those M&Ms aren't for me – they are for YOU! They are for visitors! So I (I tell myself) can have those M&Ms in my office, as long as I recognize that they are not for me! That gumball machine is like my own private tree of forbidden fruit.

For the most part, I do a pretty good job turning my back on those M&Ms. I know they aren't good for me. I know that if I eat them they will only make me hungrier. I know that they are empty calories, even though they are cute and colorful and delicious.

But *sometimes*, after eating my lunch, or if I'm procrastinating on my sermon, or just feeling a little down, I feel I just want a *little* something sweet. Surely, one crank of the gumball machine won't hurt? Just. One. Taste. is surely all I need, and then I'll be satisfied. One mini-handful of only 5 or 6 M&Ms won't *kill* me!

And so I turn that handle, and I scoop out the M&Ms, and I eat them *very* slowly.

And then I turn around and crank the handle two or three more times. It's like, once I open the floodgates, the temptation overwhelms me, and I am lost in an M&M fog.

Why does this happen? Why do I succumb to temptation? Is it just a pathetic lack of self-control?

To answer that question, let's look at the other story of temptation from today: Jesus tempted in the wilderness by the devil. *Three times*. Three times the devil tries to tempt Jesus. Right off the bat it's a pretty big temptation he throws out – turn these stones into bread. Jesus has just been fasting in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights! The Scripture tells us flat out that Jesus is *starving*! How badly do you think Jesus would have wanted to eat those stones by that point, even without turning them into bread? The temptation to give in to the devil, and solve his problem himself instead of waiting on God, must have been HUGE. But Jesus says no.

Then the devil challenges Jesus to prove himself by jumping off a building. If Jesus is the son of God, surely he won't die! But again Jesus says no. And finally, the devil tempts Jesus with something seductive to just about any human – power and glory over others. But, still, Jesus says no.

Unlike Eve and Adam, and unlike me, and probably unlike you, Jesus cannot be tempted.

And why is that?

The truth is, we can only be tempted by something we want or something we need. We think that if we just had that *thing* – that M&M, that forbidden fruit, that job, that child, that drink – we would be complete. We would be satisfied. I believe that, as humans, each of us has an emptiness in our life. And, as humans, we long to fill that void.

When Adam and Eve go for that forbidden fruit, they're not hungry for an apple! They are hungry for wholeness, self-sufficiency, mastery of their surroundings. The snake plays on this hunger, and makes them think they can satisfy it on their own! By naming their incompleteness, the snake makes it real and draws it to their attention. And in doing this, Adam and Eve begin to trust more in themselves than in the God who has created them and given them everything they could ever need.

Contrast that scene in the garden, then, with Jesus' experience in the wilderness. The devil is trying to unsettle Jesus by provoking the same kind of emptiness in his life that the snake pointed out to Eve. He does this by calling Jesus' identity, and his relationship with God, into question. Why wait for God to send you food, Jesus, if you can turn these rocks into bread yourself? Why wonder if you're as powerful as God, when you can prove it by jumping off the Temple? Why bow to an all-powerful God when you can have dominion over the kingdoms of the world yourself?

The temptation is the same as Adam and Eve's (and maybe, on a different scale, as my M&M problem), but Jesus responds differently. Jesus refuses establish his own worth and identity on his own terms. Jesus chooses to remain dependent on God. Jesus knows *who* he is by remembering *whose* he is.

As humans, we are not complete in and of ourselves. We have a hole inside of us – one that we are restless to fill. Theologian David Lose says that “Adam and Eve behold the fruit and conclude in a heartbeat that their hole is shaped just like that fruit. Yet after they eat, the emptiness remains. Today we might imagine that hole to be shaped just like a new car, or computer, or better house, or the perfect spouse” – or even an M&M.

But French philosopher Blaise Pascal once described this condition of emptiness as having a “*God-shaped* hole.” And this is what Jesus demonstrates. There is no filling of that gap, no permanent erasing of that hole, except in and through our relationship with God. Or, as Augustine said, we humans are always restless until we rest in God.

Why do we succumb to temptation? *Why* do we do things and say things we shouldn't, even though we know better? Is all we need a little more willpower and self-control?

Actually, no. Self-control is not the opposite of temptation. *Trust* is the opposite of temptation.

The good news is that Jesus opens up the way for us to fill the hole inside of us with a relationship with the living God. Jesus himself was tempted, and Jesus himself relied on God. When we realize that God's grace is sufficient for our needs, we

develop the courage to stand amid our doubts and fears. We remember not only *who* we are, but *whose* we are: beloved children of the living God.

Today during our celebration of communion, each of you has the opportunity to relinquish an earthly temptation that keeps you from a closer relationship with God. I invite each of you to take the sticky note you will find in your bulletin, and write on it that thing that you have been using to fill the hole inside you – maybe it's food, or television, or alcohol, or work, or material possessions. Whatever it is, bring the sticky note to the communion table, and leave it in the basket at the cross, so that you may open yourself to the possibility of filling that hole with God today.

Something is going to fill that hole inside of you. Why not let it be God?