

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

Matthew 4:1-11

Staying Human

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In the garden of Eden, there is a tree.

Actually, there are two trees at the center of the story. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil — the one God said not to eat from — and the Tree of Life.

God gives Adam a simple command:

“You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.”

It’s not a trick. It’s not cruelty. It’s a boundary.

It is God saying, “You are a creature. I am the Creator. Trust me.”

But then comes the serpent. And the temptation is subtle.

“You will not die... your eyes will be opened... you will be like God.”

That’s the hook.

It’s easy to think this story is about breaking a rule. About eating forbidden fruit. About being naughty. But that’s too small.

The real temptation in Eden wasn’t hunger. It wasn’t curiosity. It wasn’t even disobedience for its own sake.

It was the temptation to step out of being human and step into being God.

Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way:

“Lent comes along and we give up things that are bad for us or take on things that are good for us, as if the most serious temptations in life were to drink too much scotch or eat too much fat or stay in bed on Sunday morning. But I do not think that is what these stories are about. I do not think they are about the temptation not to be a good human being. I think they are about the temptation not to be a human being at all. As far as I can tell, what Adam and Jesus are both tempted by is the chance to play God ... One trespassed; one stayed put. One tried to be God; one was content to remain a human being.”

The serpent doesn’t tempt Adam and Eve to become worse humans.

The serpent tempts them to become more than human. “To be like God.”

To decide good and evil for themselves. To control their own destiny.

To stop trusting and start grasping.

And they take the fruit. And what happens?

They don’t become gods. They become afraid.

They hide. They feel shame. They cover themselves.

The very next thing that happens is distance — from God, from each other, even from themselves. And eventually, they are driven out of the garden — away from the Tree of Life. That’s the tragedy. They reach for godlikeness... and lose life.

Now fast forward to the wilderness. After his baptism, Jesus is led into the desert. Forty days. Hungry. Vulnerable.

And the tempter comes again.
The temptations sound different, but they're the same at the root.
"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread."
You have power. Use it for yourself.
"Throw yourself down from the temple."
Force God's hand. Make God prove something.
"All these kingdoms I will give you."
Take control. Rule without suffering.

Each temptation is an invitation to step outside the limits of being human. To seize control. To bypass trust. To play God.

Now notice something different.
Jesus actually could do these things.
Adam grasped at something that was never his.
Jesus refuses something that truly is his.
He stays within human limits.
He is hungry — and does not turn stones into bread.
He is vulnerable — and does not leap from the temple.
He is promised power — and does not take the shortcut.
Where Adam grasped, Jesus trusts.
Where Adam reached, Jesus remains.
Where Adam trespassed, Jesus stayed put.
He stays human.
And that is his victory.

The deeper temptation, beneath impatience, chocolate, or greed — the one underneath all the others — is the temptation to stop being human.
To refuse our limits.
To refuse dependence.
To refuse trust.

We don't like being creatures.
We want control.
We want certainty.
We want to define good and evil on our own terms.
We want to save ourselves.
That's the old whisper: "You will be like God."

Lent exposes that whisper.
Where am I trying to run my own universe?
Where am I refusing to trust?
Where am I grasping instead of receiving?

This is also the great temptation that lures us as a society ... and as a church ... the temptation to

believe that we can be more, know more, do more than is humanly possible.

To ignore Jesus command to love our neighbour, and scapegoat problems on immigrants and minorities.

To pursue profit in investments and industry without heed to environmental damage.

To define church success in budgets and buildings rather than reconciliation and sacrifice.

"Lead us not into temptation" we pray ... because we know that, given the option, like Adam and Eve we will choose knowledge, power and control over obedience, trust and servanthood most every time.

(Ed Searcy, Lent 1, 1999)

Here is the good news.

Our hope is not that we finally resist temptation perfectly.

Adam didn't.

Israel didn't.

We don't.

The good news is that Jesus did.

Where humanity failed, Christ succeeded.

He does not simply show us how to resist temptation.

He resists it for us.

He stands in our place.

And this victory in the wilderness is only the beginning.

Because later, there will be another tree.

Not in a garden of abundance, but on a hill outside Jerusalem.

The cross.

Another tree where obedience will matter.

Another place where the temptation will return:

"If you are the Son of God..."

Come down.

Save yourself.

Prove it.

And again, he stays put.

He refuses to grasp at divine privilege.

He remains obedient — obedient unto death.

And because he does, something remarkable happens.

The story that began with humanity being driven away from the Tree of Life does not end there.

In the last pages of Scripture, in Revelation, the Tree of Life appears again.

But the way back is not through our effort.

It is through Christ's obedience.

Through the One who stayed human.

Through the One who trusted the Father completely.

Through the One who triumphed over temptation.

He opens the way back to life.

So what does this mean for us?

First, it means relief.

Your salvation does not rest on your ability to resist every temptation. It rests on Christ's victory.

When you fail — and you will — you are not cast out beyond hope. You belong to the One who has already overcome.

Second, it means freedom.

Because Jesus stayed human, you are free to be human.

You do not have to be God.

You do not have to control everything.

You do not have to define yourself, justify yourself to God, or save yourself.

You are a creature — beloved, limited, dependent.

And that is not a curse. It is a gift.

Third, it means trust.

Every day we face smaller versions of the same choice:

Will I grasp, or will I trust?

Will I control, or will I obey?

Will I play God, or will I remain a faithful human being?

By the Spirit, united to Christ, we begin to share in his obedience. Not perfectly. Not all at once.

But truly.

We learn to say, with him,

“One does not live by bread alone.”

“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

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

We learn to live as creatures who trust the Creator.