

"...for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." The first commandment - Genesis 2:17 - is delivered with instant judgement. There is death in disobedience, according to this account of the first encounter with the rule of law. Except...they did not die.

Yes, there is more to the story - the search for 'man's companion' that involves naming animals and a sudden surgery, the result of which is "flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone" - and this woman (according to male mythology) is responsible for all the mischief...and yet they do not die.

Not from the act of eating the fruit, at least.

Yes - I know the theological explanation - the first act of disobedience leads to expulsion from paradise which puts us directly in the path of death. Our divine nature is lost to us in that 'genesis' moment, and we are doomed and miserable...except we're not.

Mortal, yes - but miserable? Doomed? The rest of Scripture speaks against that. There are some troubling - even terrifying moments, but our attempts to listen and follow and otherwise insinuate ourselves into God's good graces make for some inspiring reading.

Do you see? Do you get it? The point of our sin may simply be that in our nature we are not perfect - perfection not being possible, even in the idyllic early mythology of our ancestors in the faith - and our job is not to eliminate sin so much as it is to learn to live in the consequences as best we can.

"But what about Jesus?" I hear you say - his death taking away our sins, and all that? That is a good question for the beginning of Lent.

We will spend the next five weeks feeling prodigiously sorry for and about our current state of being. The liturgy will remind us of our depravity, the hymns will be occasionally mournful. The Christian church will collectively drag its feet to the cross, and the horror show of Holy Week, and preachers like me will try to frame this in ways that won't send people screaming from the room. If ever sin is real to the church, it is during Lent. And in the gospel lesson this morning we are reminded that sin was real for Jesus too.

I will remind you of the power of metaphor - the truth of it. Jesus baptism is followed by exile; a time alone in the wilderness...except he is not alone, is he...? The Spirit is there - the same Spirit that 'drove him there. And the tempter is there; always willing to fill the otherwise empty space in human existence. We accept that no one else is present, and yet we have this story; an account after the fact that explores a dialogue to which there were no witnesses.

This dialogue is either a contest of wills or a strenuous debate over the interpretation of Scripture, or both. Back and forth they go; each with a point to prove; each with everything to lose. And in the end - stalemate.

The adversary (various greek diablos / satana describe the one who is testing) departs as suddenly as he arrived; Jesus is tended in his corner by heavenly messengers.

So even if you imagine some version of 'perfect Jesus', he was not free from the **complicated presence** of sin. He faces temptation, just like the rest of humanity, in fact he is pushed to the limits of his resistance. And even as Matthew's account ends the matter is hardly settled. The tempter leaves - Jesus is comforted - but nothing is decided. The spectre of sin looms large, even over Jesus' life.

Was he tempted? yes. Did he let temptation conquer him? NO, but Scripture suggests it was a struggle even for Jesus to the bitter end.

Remember that scene in the garden on the night of his arrest? Tempted much? I think so - but in Jesus we are shown how to live with the presence of that temptation; to walk in the presence of sin and still walk with God. Jesus lived and died in a way that acknowledged the world - and everyone in it - as flawed and broken. His resurrection is a reminder of the powerful potential that exists - in us and around us - in SPITE of that brokenness.

Identifying that brokenness, Jesus was better able to respond in love and faith in the presence of sin. And thus is pride overcome by trust; and the lust for power is laid to rest by the admission that true power is represented by the very idea of God.

We are tempted to imagine that the Genesis story and the story of Jesus temptation are opposites; in the Genesis account, we failed to resist, and in the gospels, Jesus proves resistance is possible - but only for him.

The illusion of perfection is the carrot that is dangled in front of us to convince us heaven is worth the effort. But it's possible that in these two stories we see examples of the whole spectrum of possibilities. Sin called to us; even in paradise. Sin badgers even the Son of Man.

The difference is in the choices we make. The choices that set us against God (or in place of God) - the things we do that willingly push God away, these are sin. From that mythical first choice to now - these are the things that build walls between us and God. But when we stand up for compassionate, loving and ethical choices; when we recognize God in the stranger and tend the hungry, and visit the sick -in these choices we acknowledge God, and God is present and real in those choices.

Lent is a time to test our choices - to set ourselves once again on the path in companionship with God. In a world this badly broken it isn't easy. But we follow a pretty good example.