

Only Human
Menno Mennonite Church
March 1, 2020
Lent 1; Year A

Purpose: To recall the work of lent as a season to bring humanity in touch with itself.

Message: We struggle with the ongoing inclination to desire the powers of God.

Scripture: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 [I will read]; Matthew 4:1-11 **Please read**

Synopsis: Lent reminds us of what we least want to have brought to mind: the fact that we are human. That we have limits. That we fail all too often in our life and living. As much as we want to deny it, in the spiritual sense we remain our dust-ridden selves, despite the fact that we time and again try to make ourselves God. For Adam and Eve, the temptation was to rely on their intellect and knowledge and bypass what God had said. For Jesus, the temptation, ironically, was to use his status as Son of God to his own ends of power and privilege. This, more than the rules and thou-shalts and shalt-nots of the world is our ongoing temptation: to cross that line that separates created and creator. When we allow ourselves to hold more closely our own humanness for the gift it is, we better know our own nature which is a reflection of the holy. We are called to discern between that would make us God and that which allows us to remain human.

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

¹⁵The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. ¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; ¹⁷but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

3 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” ²The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” ⁶So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. ⁷Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Genesis 2:15-17 3:1-7

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¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good
and evil you shall not eat,
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^{NRS} **Genesis 3:1**

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So it begins. This is the start of it all—the long sorted story of how humanity and God go together down through the ages. God creates a good world, and populates that world with humans, and humans fail the grand test of simply being with God, obeying God. It needs to be said here that this is not about who-did-what-when and of what gender they happened to be. That is beside the point, because what is being spoken to here is the human condition, and the nature of Human inclination. God gave them ears to hear and brains to think and they chose to listen to the one saying “come on, what’s the worst that could happen?” We know that this is the nature of human inclination and temptation, and we don’t like it. We don’t come here often because like the hairdo we had back in high school that we thought was so cool, and would never go out of style, we are embarrassed by what it says about us—both of us, male and female. It takes us back to our beginnings and digs up some dirt on us, and who likes that? That is what these first days of Lent do with us; take us back to our origins. If you have ever done Ash Wednesday services you are met with this reminder: remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return. With Genesis in mind, we rephrase that: remember your nature, for it is this that you are to strive against, to work away from, this sinful strand of DNA. It is a good reminder, but that does not mean we like the trip to get there.

Our other reading, the temptations of Jesus is also a beginning. It is the launch of Jesus’ ministry and he is driven by the Spirit into the desert where he meets Satan—the adversary to render the Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek most accurately—and he was met with challenges. For him it was trying to contextualize the work he was taking up and how it was going to be with him. It was not as though Jesus’ temptations didn’t make sense; feed yourself and millions besides with a flip of the hand; establish your divine identity beyond a shadow of a doubt so no one could possibly mistake you or your message; take the power of this world as the power of the kingdom and make all things come together once and for all. Rationally, logically, these make a lot of sense. Three times he was tempted by the bible-quoting tempter, confirming yet again that just because someone is quoting the Bible chapter and verse does not automatically mean that they are up to any good. Jesus refused to cross over the line. He passed the test. He succeeded where the first humans did not. That’s how we read this pairing, that is how we make sense of this. Sure, the whole son-of-God thing might have helped, but he refused to cross the line in the sand drawn by God, and all was well. He was already God’s son “with whom God

was well pleased” from the baptism. Now he was confirmed and tested, and ready to change the world. For the time-being, the devil stood defeated.

Lent, this season of self-examination invites into the wilderness, into a time of looking at who we really are. We begin with these two stories of how temptation works, and how the world is within them. Traditionally, this is the season that we are invited to draw lines for ourselves and to refrain—from meat, from chocolate, alcohol, what have you, and to use the discipline of self-denial as a moment of transformation. It is easy to make these days where we engage in self-examination and a moment to polish up our own ability to be better people, better humans. We try to keep the bad things on one side of us, and to remain on the good side of life, at least for 40 days or so. We see our temptations as the banal things in the world that keep us fat, happy, and distracted (not necessarily in that order) and that we can control them if we but diet better. But I don’t think that these things are really what our fundamental temptations are about when you get down to it. I don’t think we spend our time like a Tom and Jerry cartoon with devils on one shoulder, angels on the other, while we ponder whether or not to be good or bad human being. I think that when it comes down to it, our real temptation is whether or not to be human at all.

A statement like that needs an explanation. As much as we enjoy our consumptions and pleasures in life, and the things that make us feel safe and powerful relative to other people, I think the root temptation that we all carry is fairly universal: that we would rather be more, and we feel like we ought to be more. I know that it is true for me. I spend a lot of time wishing time and again that I could fix that which I cannot, both for myself and for those who I love, especially many of you. I can’t, but I sure like to try. Time and again I find myself wishing that my magic wand was not in the shop and I could just make the anxieties, pains, and problems of the world disappear. I, as we all do, lust after control, knowledge, and certainty over anything else. I know I am not alone in in this. Culturally, we are presented with the suggestion that this is life should be—we click a button, say the magic words to the genie in the technological bottle and viola: everything happens. Time and again, we are tempted to take the seat of the divine, wishing that we could simply get some of the big stuff out there taken care of and put to bed once and for all. We see the world, we see what we wish the world would be, and they don’t match. And that can be disappointing, causing us to take up the sport of disputing with the

divine for a seeming lack of care—a perfectly reasonable and healthy pastime, provided that we remember that all it can be is just that—a sport that invites us beyond ourselves.

When you look at it, that is what is in the mix in both of these stories, isn't it? Adam and Eve break their dependence on God not out of some ambition toward rebellion as much as a longing to know that they too understood the divine mystery. For Jesus, the temptations were to take his identity to the ends of human power, to be the Superman who it was in his power to be, and not follow God's way of power. It is worth noting here that these temptations are not those that God generates. God does not put these options out there. It is only the tempter who places the option on the table, each one with 10,000 strings attached. The fundamental temptation is the same: deny your humanity and insist on something that you are not ultimately created to be.

Jesus is exposed to the same temptations that the first humans were. Jesus stayed put, knowing it to be better to be what you are created to be. There is a grand irony that on one hand it is humans trying to be God that kick off this massively complicated world in which we live while on the other it is God who comes in human form and insists on remaining so, on dying do, that redeems the human form once and for all. As disconcerting as it is to be brought back to the most basic reality of human condition. But I think the reminder of Ash Wednesday, of Lent that we are wholly human is not meant to be depressing or disregard the human condition. Rather the opposite. It is asking us to remember that we did not create ourselves. It is meant to liberate us from the tyranny of needing to occupy the role of the divine, even as we accept that within our fragile, all too frail selves rests the creator's spark. But we are not called to be THE creator. We are not obliged under penalty of judgment to heal all of the world's ills; only to love our neighbors. We are not responsible for pulling all the strings in our world; only to be responsive to the one who made this world and remakes it daily. It means we can receive bread and provision given us without obliging ourselves with the all-too-heavy responsibility of being the sole provider. We can celebrate our mortal frame even while we trust that there is that is beyond us. Acknowledging our humanness, holding our limitations, and being aware of our finitude can frustrate us, yes. But it can also liberate us in ways we can only begin to imagine. It can free us to be who we are called to be: people of God's love, but not a people saddled with God's responsibility. That is an important and useful distinction.

Lent serves us best when it invites again into the wilderness, into the quiet places of our lives to contemplate what it means to be that we are created to be, not to demand more of our

already weary souls. Adam's story is our story. But so is Jesus' story too. We have both in our ancestry, both impulses are at play within us. When we are tempted, as we often are, by the Adam within to play God and to demand to be more than what we are, Jesus comes to us inviting us to discover that our own God-like abilities were meant not to curse our humanity, to alienate us from who we are, or to condemn us for being tempted, but to invite us to enter into our humanness as fully as we can, as fully as we dare, and to be blessed by it. To be blessed by the freedom that, as a longtime mentor of mine Erland Waltner was given to say, God is God, and I am not, and that is indeed good. Even here outside the walls of the world as it was meant to be, God breathes life into us again and again, even when we expect it least, enlivening our dusty selves, and bringing out that which on God can do in our world.

As you consider the disciplines of Lent, I invite you to look beyond the demands of diet and sacrifice. If they serve to remind you of God in their absence, fair enough. But consider too the disciplines of acceptance as well as denial. Perhaps the discipline of loving that in yourself you find least lovable. Perhaps it is the discipline of forgiving yourself for that which you wish you would have done, said, or lived differently, or accepting the forgiveness offered you, but that is so hard to really take as your own. Or maybe it is the simple discipline of accepting yet again that you, each one of you are the beloved child of God. No failure on your part or deeply seeded sense of sin can ever; ever; ever take that from you. Embrace your humanness, even as you let go of the need to occupy the role of the divine.

Dust you are. To dust you shall return. Yet, look around; See what amazing things God can do with only dust? Thanks be to God.

- Corona virus: We do not want to over react, yet we know that there is an impact.
- We name our fear. We also name the one who casts out all fear in love.
- We know that we will live in communities with many different responses. Our work remains the same: to incarnate God's love the best way we know how.
- We will do church together as always, even should it require us to be creative about how that happens. We are Christ's body and we will maintain that come what may.

Congregational Prayer

Creating, loving God

From the very first, you breathed life into us,

And said again and again it is good.

Even when things went wrong, you did not leave us alone,

You did not fault us for the failing,

But invite us time and again to rise,

And to walk once again, following you

We thank you that you allow us to live in the goodness of who we have been created to be.

Help us to trust you, to follow you with courage.

Even when we step into the wilderness remind us

that there is no place we can be that is beyond your love.

God of the present moment,

God who in Jesus stills the storm

and soothes the frantic heart;

bring hope and courage to all

who wait or work in uncertainty.

Grant us the courage to face a future that can be hard to predict

And even harder to control.

Your promise your disciples not lives of ease,

But lives that are infused with your faithful presence,

Come what may.

Soothe our anxieties of every stripe,

Heal our worries.

Incarnate God,

Help us to be the hands and feet of your love you have called us to be.

Invites us time and again to new hope,

New faithfulness,

And new deliverance from all that would demand us to put anything before you.

May this be our truth, now and always,

Amen.