



Parish of St. Peter's Anglican Church,

Hackett's Cove, Nova Scotia

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Sermon, Lent 1

Sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all, because all have sinned.

I

The readings for this first Sunday in Lent have a common theme – that of temptation.

Here we are at the beginning of Lent, full of temptations, but hopefully also ready to join Christ on the road to Jerusalem. As we all know, the New Testament narrative is one of triumphal entry into Jerusalem – followed by betrayal, torture and death. But the death is followed by resurrection and salvation!

How did we get here?

It is interesting that in the Beginning, there was only one law – **don't eat the fruit of that tree!** Well, we have all been children, and we know what we get tempted to do when we get told not to....

And so we were cast out of the Garden, and forced to sort things out for ourselves. And we sort of messed that up too. So, at the time of Moses, the people of Israel received the Ten Commandments. And since then, we have made rules for pretty much everything, which we have then gone and broken.

But our society still has a proliferation of laws. Some are official – which side of the road to drive on. Some are unofficial – adultery is not illegal, but it still might not be advisable. Some are trivial – white shoes after Labour Day. And some clearly make more sense than others.

Christ's gifts to us include the Two Great Commandments – to love God and to love our fellow humans. And if we do that, everything else should follow. Right?

But we are always **tempted** to see how far we can go. It's a bit of a vicious circle – we have rules because we would otherwise tend to stray – and no sooner do we have a rule, but we are tempted to break it!

II

This chapter of Matthew immediately follows the story of Christ's baptism in the river Jordan in Chapter Three.

Jesus submitted himself to be baptized, to do the Father's will, to "fulfill all righteousness," preparing him for the temptation he was about to face.

So, Jesus was baptized, and then he took off by himself for the wilderness, and spent 40 days and 40 nights alone without food.

The number "40" occurs frequently in the Bible. It rained for 40 days in the Flood. Moses was on the mountain for 40 days. Elijah traveled for 40 days. And Jesus was in the desert for 40 days.

(Many modern Biblical scholars tend to think that "40" was used in Biblical times just as an arbitrarily Big Number! So it is perhaps only a coincidence that our Lenten season – five weeks plus the half-week after Ash Wednesday – is almost 40 days! But it is perhaps long enough.)

The Jordan is a powerful metaphor for our lives. It rises in the mountains of Lebanon, where other rivers flow together. It flows south, into the Sea of Galilee, the region where Christ lived and did so much of his work. But then it ends in the Dead Sea; a place where the water cannot support life. It is, of course, easier to stay in the fertile valley, close to the fresh water supply. But if we turn right a bit before we hit the Dead Sea, we are on that road to Jerusalem!

III

So, what is Jesus doing here in the desert, hungry and thirsty, scorched by day, cold by night? He didn't have any sin to repent; nor was he known to be an ascetic.

Perhaps it is for our sins that he goes out into the desert. Or perhaps – like us – he needs to escape from the everyday issues, and focus inward. He knows – more than anyone – that the way ahead will not be easy, even for the Son of God.

In previous sermons, I have talked about wild places as being close to God. But deserts do not sustain life – which is why we rarely live in them. We are not in the Garden. The water that we need to live – the water we were baptized with – is not there.

Sometimes we find ourselves in deserts, whether they are real or spiritual. There are places and points in our lives that put us to the test. But they can bring us close to God, perhaps because that is when we realize how worthless the things are that we left behind in the town. When we are our most wretched; that is when God finds us.

The Devil, Satan – let's call him by his name – came, and said to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Jesus the man is literally starving, so the Devil knew which button to press. But Jesus has a bit more fasting left in him – and he rejects the temptation!

So then – Jesus being Jesus, or perhaps Satan being Satan – they are miraculously able to travel to the Temple in Jerusalem. And here, Satan asks Jesus to demonstrate his immortality, by jumping off.

Jesus knows that his immortality is not that simple. He will later be nailed to the cross. He will die. But he will be resurrected. So, again he refuses.

Satan's last effort is to take Jesus to the top of the highest mountain and show him all the riches of the world, and the power that he could have.

But Jesus has that power already; he is God's son. He does not need to worship a false god to gain earthly powers!

But how often do the rest of us get tempted to do just that?

I think it is our nature to want easy answers to difficult questions. We are surrounded by tempting advertising that make us desire quick solutions. For example: "Take this pill or drink this power-shake and you'll be skinny for your next major event!" or "Need money? Give us \$20 and we'll lend you \$300!" It all sounds good doesn't it? But it is anything but!

Christ could have given us easy answers, but he is our mediator and advocate with God, so that we can work at improving ourselves rather than being spoon fed. If you just give children answers when teaching them, they don't learn anything.

IV

Let's take this back to Adam and Eve:

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.

Well, what's not to like? Edible, beautiful fruit – and knowing good and evil!

And you know the story. Adam and Eve weren't content to submit to a higher authority. They wanted to be their own gods. So they ate.

This allegory is not important because of what may or may not have happened to Adam and Eve thousands of years ago, but what it says about human nature from the beginning of time. In short, the story of Adam and Eve is our story:

We were created in God's image.

We resist God's authority over our lives.

We often take the easy way out.

So, God acknowledged their independence, their knowledge of Good and Evil and they were exiled from Eden. They had to start solving their own problems. They would have to make their living off the land. They would return to the dust, which God used to create them.

But it's funny – knowing good and evil doesn't make us any better at choosing good over evil. Our alienation from God started at that moment, when we thought we had acquired His knowledge! As Joni Mitchell beautifully put it: “We are start-dust; we are golden. / But we've got to get ourselves back to the Garden.”

V

When I began writing this sermon, I found I was humming The Eagles' 1976 song, “Hotel California”. The narrator is on “a dark desert highway, cool wind in my hair.” Then:

Up ahead in the distance, I saw a shimmering light / My head grew heavy and my sight grew dim / I had to stop for the night.

There she stood in the doorway / I heard the mission bell; / And I
was thinking to myself / This could be Heaven or this could be
Hell....

There is temptation here in **this** desert. The song mentions women, wine and drugs. And the man falls for it, discovering eventually that: “You can check out anytime you like, but **you can never leave.**” Not all the ways out of the desert are the same. The song says that “We are all just prisoners here, of our own device.” That is probably what Adam and Eve realized, when they found themselves East of Eden!

Band member

Don Henley wrote that: "It's basically a song about the dark underbelly of the American dream and about excess in America, which is something we knew a lot about.... [there] is a fine line between the American Dream, and the American nightmare.”

The desert is a metaphor. It is a place without sustenance, where we have to confront raw issues of survival.

It is not a place one can survive for long – certainly not 40 days! It is the nightmare.

The road from Galilee to Jerusalem will take us through barren and rocky places before we are invited to that upper room to share bread and wine with Jesus. And that is the dream.

VI

Lent comes from the Old English word for Spring – *Lenten*. It comes at a time of year that we long for new life, for rebirth, and for resurrection.

We often hear, “What are you giving up for Lent?” If you are giving up something that keeps you from “loving the Lord God with your whole heart, soul, mind and strength, and loving your neighbor as yourself” - then by all means give it up! And don’t go back to it on Easter Monday!

There must be, in us, the continual purgation and purification of our loves, away from temptation. Lent is a time for us to pay particular attention to how we live our lives. We have many loves in our lives, but we need turn our hearts back to Christ and love him as much as much as he loves us. During Lent our hearts are purged and purified in the passion of Christ, in the pilgrimage of his perfect love for us.

That is the intent of Lent and the significance of beginning in ashes. The ashes are the ashes of our repentance, because of having turned away from God in sin. They turn us to redemption: saving or being saved from sin, error, or evil. We are called to repentance. This requires an awareness of our imperfect loves.

Last Wednesday evening, I made the sign of the cross on many foreheads, in this sanctuary, as a sign of our willingness to cleanse our

hearts and walk with Christ towards Jerusalem. We have started our five-week Lenten journey - the period of prayer, and preparation for Easter.

Like Adam and Eve, we are those beloved children who continually rebel and do the very things God commands us not to do. This is our chance to “turn from our wickedness and live.”

We must be purged and purified through what the hymn calls “*Love divine, all loves excelling.*” There is no greater love. After all, God gave us his only begotten son, and it was that son who died for our sins!

Let us repent and be thankful. Amen.