

WASTED DAYS & WASTED NIGHTS

3/1/20 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Lent 1 (A): Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

As I was praying over these texts last week, I kept hearing a country western song from my youth. I became convinced the lyrics were "40 days and 40 nights," and that it was sung by someone like Charlie Pride or Merle Haggard. With some help from Google, I eventually figured out the song I was thinking of was actually "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights," recorded by Freddy Fender in the mid-70s. Anyone remember it?

At first, I just laughed and brushed it off as a mis-remembering, but then I decided to look a little closer, because I trust God speaks to us in all kinds of ways; why not through a Freddy Fender song? As I read the lyrics, things started clicking into place. The chorus cries out:

Why should I keep loving you,
When I know that you're not true?
And why should I call your name,
When you're to blame for making me blue?

Don't you remember the day,
That you went away and left me?

I realize this is a song about human love gone wrong, but it's also the story of our relationship with God. God is there loving us, unconditionally, calling us by name, waiting for us to fully embrace God's love offered to us so freely, but again and again, we shrug off that love. Wasted days and wasted nights. Over and over, we break God's heart, and, yet, God still yearns for us.

We are so easily distracted by other things that seem like love to us, or by others who offer a distorted kind of love in the form of worldly power. That age-old story of humans being distracted by another source of power is captured in our reading from Genesis, and, then, further explored in the passage from Romans. Now, before we dive into those readings, it's important to pull things apart a bit.

We have the Genesis passage, which features a serpent as tempter. Then, we have the Romans passage, where the Apostle Paul points back to the sin of Adam. And those readings are paired in the lectionary today with Matthew's version of Jesus being tempted by Satan. All together, it's tempting to assume they are all pointing fingers at this evil entity outside of us. But that's probably not accurate.

For instance, most scholars don't believe the serpent in Genesis to be a representative of Satan, or even of evil, for that matter. Rather, this is a story trying to, not only explain the origins of creation, but pointing out the limits of our free will. In fact, in the Ancient Near East—the location and time that the hearers of Genesis occupied—people would have associated the serpent with rebirth and renewal, even sexuality and fertility, as well as healing (think of the symbol used in the medical world: a snake wrapped around a staff).

While it's handy to blame the temptation on Satan, the truth is, because we were given free will, it's the humans who become distracted from the promise God offers to be our source and center of all. This close dive into the text also helps us notice other details. In the stretch of time before the serpent engaged Eve, God had explained, to Adam, humanity's role in creation, which is to be responsible for creation.

In the midst of that is a really fascinating play on words. Adam, which would have been pronounced more like uh-DAHm, literally means human in Hebrew. And the word for soil in Hebrew is Adama [a-DAH-muh]. Not only does God give humanity the job of caring for creation, the very words: Adam [uh-DAHm] and Adama [a-DAH-muh], human and soil are tied together. The earth is explicitly linked by God to humanity. Humans were never meant to just hang out and enjoy the Garden of Eden, and we weren't a by-product of creation, but created, intentionally, with a purpose.

And almost immediately, sensing the power of being caretakers of creation, the humans take action that indicate they think they should decide what's good and what's evil. Sound familiar? How many times have any one of us found ourselves in a fix, because we thought we knew what was best for ourselves? Overriding the guidance we felt from God, wanting more, wanting to be right, wanting to do it our own way, only to have it all fall apart in disastrous ways. The serpent simply asks a question, but it's the humans who make the choice. We always have a choice.

In stark contrast is the temptation of Jesus. The setting for this passage is just after Jesus's baptism and right before he begins his earthly ministry in earnest. We're told that Jesus is "led up by the Spirit into the wilderness". That intentionality—"led up by the Spirit"—is a clear indication that this was no accident. It's not like any of us were worried that Jesus was going to give in to these temptations, right? Instead, this is a way for Jesus to model resisting temptation for his disciples...for us.

And that's what discipleship is all about. Watching one's teacher, and then trying to imitate that teacher. Of course, none of us will be tempted in those extreme situations, but without a doubt, we will each be tempted by the allure of more power in one way or another. In the same way that Adam and Eve were distracted from their focus on God, we are tempted. So, Jesus refuses to use his divine power for material gain, or to ensure his own safety, or to become arrogant about who he is.

Although the Apostle Paul might confuse things in Romans by referring back to Adam and the original sin, he does make an important clarification. He points out that Jesus's death was not simply a direct exchange for our forgiveness. In simple terms that would mean that because Jesus died and our sins are forgiven, we don't have to do anything more about it.

Rather, Paul insists, it is because Jesus died, that we are called back into right relationship with God. At the foot of the cross, our distractions are removed, and we can see clearly God waiting for us, full of love, forgiveness, and grace, which calls us back into our responsibility of caring for creation.

Seeing clearly that God is there waiting for us in those moments is the same as the image described in the passage from Matthew: "Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him." When we turn back from our distractions, there is God.

There's a similar movement present in the Genesis story, but with a different spin. Even though God warns that if the humans eat of the Tree of Life, they'll die, God doesn't carry out that threat. Not only are they granted life, but God seems to have compassion on them in their new circumstance. At first, the humans feel shame at their nudity and grab fig leaves to cover up. But in the verses following the passage read this morning, we're told God makes them "garments of skins...and clothes them" (Genesis 3:21).

Again and again, God meets our distractions—our propensity to turn from God’s love—with forgiveness, grace and love. There are limits to our freedom, and our choices come with consequences—sometimes painful consequences—yet, God is still there, loving us just the same.

So, here we are surrounded by signs that we are in Lent: covered crosses, solemn hymns, a Psalm prayed by the reader only. It’s all meant to remove the distractions that keep us from the awareness that God is our source and center. You may have noticed there’s sand in the font instead of water—a reminder that we enter into the wilderness with Jesus.

Some of you may have decided to give something up for Lent, others of you may have decided to take on a practice. Not many of us will choose to fast, but I saw a social media post attributed to Pope Francis that had some great ideas for fasting. Some of them are:

- Fast from hurting words and say kind words.
- Fast from anger and be filled with patience.
- Fast from bitterness and fill your hearts with joy.
- Fast from grudges and be reconciled.

Whether you give something up or take something on, the discipline is meant to both remind you of the limits of our free will and to remove a distraction, so that our focus comes back to God and the trust that God is the source of our power. Yes, there are limits on our freedom, but God’s love is boundless. So, how will you engage your spirituality these next six weeks, in order that you don’t look back and see them as wasted days and wasted nights?

-AMEN