

Into the Wilderness (Genesis 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7 & Matthew 4: 11)

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No sooner are human beings brought to life, blessed and named as Man (Adam) and Woman, than they're confronted by the lure of the serpent, a cunning deceiver who tempts them away from their rightful dependence on God. So says Genesis Chapter 3. This story, known in the Christian tradition as 'the Fall', imagines an event of disobedience which doomed humanity to exile from God's garden of plenty and from themselves. Almost a millennium later, this story was subtly but strikingly retold in the gospel narratives. No sooner is the man, Jesus, brought to life in baptism, blessed and named as God's beloved son, than he's led into the wilderness to face the devil, a cunning deceiver who presses him to forsake his rightful dependence on God. This time, however, the tempter is unsuccessful. The story is not only recapitulated but redeemed.

We are embarking on the season of Lent – six weeks leading to Easter during which we remember Jesus' journey to his death and resurrection; six weeks to participate in a journey of our own. And according to the scriptures of our tradition, at the very beginning of this journey, as at the very beginning of the story of humanity itself, is an event of temptation, testing. As if there's *something* that must be overcome or refused at the very outset if we're not to thwart the process of our becoming. I'm interested to explore what that something is and how it matters.

So let's start with the first of our readings – the tale of the tempter's success in the book of Genesis. Here the woman is enticed by the forbidden fruit to which the serpent has directed her attention and for which he's awakened her desire. She wants it not just for its own sake, because it looks 'good for food' and 'a delight to the eyes', but for what she is made to believe it promises – wisdom, the knowledge of good and evil, equality with God, god-likeness. So she takes and

eats it, shares it with her husband, and immediately they suffer a kind of death – the death of connection. They know themselves naked, exposed, vulnerable. For the first time they feel self-conscious and ashamed.

Now I know the whole notion of ‘the Fall’ has had (to say the least) poor press in recent years. In fact, let me count the ways ... ! Feminists are concerned that its portrayal of Eve succumbing first to the serpent’s wiles has licensed centuries’ long denigration of women as those particularly susceptible to temptation, the ‘weaker sex’ leading humanity astray. Ecologists are concerned that the portrayal of our world as ‘fallen’ has obscured the fundamental and prior goodness of the natural order, the original ‘blessing’ that creation is. This picture of a fallen world, they charge, has contributed to the Christian devaluation of nature with the disastrous consequences we see today.

When taken at face value the portrayal of God in this story seems theologically suspect and psychologically manipulative. After all, what kind of parent places the most desirable tree in the very middle of the garden and then forbids his children to touch it on pain of death? And in any case, *read* psychologically, it’s by no means obvious that this so-called ‘fall’ is a bad thing – don’t all children have to grow beyond unreflective innocence into self-awareness and parental separation? Well – yes, and yes, and yes! These critiques offer rich and important perspectives in dialogue with the text, and it seems to me undeniable that our tradition’s *reception* of story of the Fall has at times produced some pretty poisonous fruit. Nevertheless, today I want to suggest that there remains an insight here that is deep and necessary. It concerns the consequences of a perennial human tendency to resist our creatureliness, our necessary dependence, our not being God.

And in the Matthew story, it’s at this point of human resistance to dependence on God that the tempter presses again and again. Jesus has been anointed in baptism by the Spirit of God, proclaimed Son of God, and is precipitated immediately into trackless, uncharted territory – a wilderness which

he experiences no doubt spiritually, emotionally, as well as geographically. He's famished and alone. And the voice of temptation kicks in. 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread'. You've been given this grand, this impossible vocation – at the very least, take what you need to survive. And then again, borne in his imagination to the holy city, the very pinnacle of the temple, the voice whispers – do something dramatic, force God's hand, make yourself known for who you are: 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you" and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone"'. And everyone will see you, they'll be amazed! And finally, as the futility of the waiting and inaction, the seeming impotence of this desert time presses harder, the tempter shows him 'all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour' and says, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me'. Think of the good you could do. And note the repetition of 'all' – *all* the kingdoms, *all* these I will give you. A perfect fantasy of dominion.

Each of these temptations corresponds to an aspect of what Thomas Merton called the false self-system. They speak to what Thomas Keating called the 'self-made self' who wants to be 'like god', *as god*. It's who we are when we try to grasp our life for ourselves and on our terms; when we succumb to the illusion that our identity and happiness are dependent on possessing security and the means of survival, in obtaining affection and esteem, in exercising power and control. So when Jesus refuses to grasp at these things, what he resists is every temptation to live his life apart from God, to become his own source. Again and again, he yields himself to God's keeping and God's desire for him: 'one does not live by bread alone'; 'do not put ... your God to the test'; 'Worship the Lord ... and serve God alone'. ...

According to the scriptures of our tradition, there is at the very beginning of the story of Jesus, and the story of humanity itself, an event of temptation, testing. As if there's *something* that must be overcome or refused if we're really to

live, to be who we're created to be. What I'm suggesting is that the temptation we need to refuse is that we are or could be the source and sustainers of our own lives; the illusion to be let go is that we can flourish independently of God.

The biblical stories portray this event of temptation in dramatic and symbolic terms – serpent and fruit, fantastical journeys to temple and mountain tops, the devil himself appearing. But what does this 'event' of temptation look like in our lives, in yours and mine? My sense is that it's usually not, in fact, a single 'event' at all, a decisive, satanically charged episode. It's much more likely an accretion of habits and patterns of thought, refusals of trust and resistance to truth we barely notice and easily justify.

Often it originates not with willed disobedience but with mechanisms we've developed to protect ourselves against hurt, betrayal, rejection, and vulnerability, but which in the end keep us separate and afraid. These mechanisms take various forms. From destructive self-talk to addictive behaviour to resisting contradiction to fearing all risk, they constitute our ultimately futile attempts to secure our own lives and value. They show up in ways large and small, often camouflaged by compulsive habits and inattention. I'll just turn on the telly to take my mind off things; I might have another drink, or another chocolate, or rehearse my grievances, lest I become present to the sadness, anxiety or anger I sense lurking within; I'll keep busy or pick a fight or run away, so I don't have to face my powerlessness, my emptiness, my sheer fright at the magnitude of the gift of a life. And in all these ways, we resist the act of necessary trust in and receptivity to God in which our real life consists. God has created us for and wills our good; the voice of the tempter wants us to forget this truth, to believe it's all up to us. But if we want to become who we're called to be, this is the temptation we must refuse.

There is a tradition in Lent that we give something up – some habit or pattern or consumable. Partly, this is about strengthening our capacity for self-sacrifice – not in a bad, destructive or self-punishing sense – but so we get some practise disciplining our desires for the sake of a larger good, reflecting the self-

sacrifice of Jesus for love's sake. But this tradition of Lenten discipline is also, I think, about becoming more aware of where certain habits – of shopping, eating, drinking, procrastinating, gossiping, digital connection, complaining or arguing – are serving to keep us at some level disconnected from the truth of ourselves and the real source of our being. And it's only as we give them up, as we refuse their tempting pseudo-consolation, that we become present in a deeper way to the voice, the leading, the love of the One who created us.

So as we begin our Lenten journey, let us pray to become more aware of the form the 'tempter' takes in us ... and let us have the courage with Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, to refuse illusion and isolation, and give ourselves ever more wholly to the way that leads to life.