

RESISTING TEMPTATION

Resisting temptation is really hard work. Wouldn't you agree? I guess that's why so many people give in to temptation so often. Because it's such a difficult, challenging task to resist it. I mean, who wants to go through the struggle, the anguish, all that spiritual and mental exertion, of saying "no" to some action that, if we give enough time and thought to it, we can probably convince ourselves isn't so bad. After all, God knows that some people have done much worse things.

So when a time of temptation arises, we ask ourselves, "What harm is there if I . . . ?" and here, each of us can fill in the blank with our most prominent enticement. With some practice, we can become pretty good at reasoning and arguing with ourselves and God in favor of giving in to temptation.

If I did give in, what's the worst that could happen? Really? First of all, no one would even have to know I did it. I'd do it discreetly, inconspicuously, in secret. People would be none the wiser. And what I'm tempted to do isn't evil. No one would be hurt. It's not like someone would be irreparably harmed or killed by my action. And I'm only human. I'm not perfect. God knows that. So why should I bother trying to resist temptation, when it's only human nature to do what I'm tempted to do?

Yes, we can get pretty darn good at explaining, defending and justifying our temptations. To ourselves, to other people, and even to God. Take the story of the first temptation, in the Garden of Eden.

This story, whether you take it literally or not, offers an explanation of when things on earth started going south. It's where all the stuff about life we don't understand and are afraid of and get angry about—things like war, terrorism, sickness and suffering and death—this story about Adam and Eve giving in to temptation tells us how all of that began. How it came to be.

Life was once a paradise. It was like a fairy tale we read to our children. Once upon a time, in the beginning, a long time ago, a dark and formless earth waited for creation. And the Spirit of Yahweh God swept over it and caused a stream to rise up and water the ground. And from the dust of the ground, and in divine mystery, the Lord God formed a being—an "Earth creature." In Hebrew, *Adam*.

And the lord breathed into its nostrils, and it became a soul, a living being.

But the Earth creature needed a place to exist, so the Lord God planted a Garden of *Eden*, of delight, a gracious gift of life and pleasure for the newly created being. And out of the ground the Creator created many other living things: trees that were wonderful to look at and bore sweet and nourishing fruit to eat; fish that swam in the water and animals that roamed the land and birds and insects that fluttered and soared in the sky. And the Lord looked around at everything that was created and smiled. God was very pleased with everything God had made.

And the Lord God took the Earth creature and placed that creature in the Garden to cultivate it and keep it, because there was work to be done, and Yahweh God entrusted this beautiful new creation into the care of the Earth creature. It was *Adam's* appointed task. It was good to work, to have a vocation, a life's purpose, to grow and tend and create from the earth. And the work was good.

And there was freedom in the Garden of Delight. So much freedom! So many kinds of trees producing fruit that was good to eat; so many things from which the Earth creature could choose to see and do. So much freedom in how the Earth creature could live. And the freedom was good.

But not complete and absolute freedom. There was some restriction in the Garden. A boundary line was drawn around one tree—just one tree in the Garden. It was given as a reminder that this creation still belonged to God, the order of things still belonged to God, God still set the rules, God was still the Creator and the Earth creature was still the created, and all of creation, including *Adam*, had to live by the terms God had given. The boundary was for the human creature's protection. And the boundary was good.

All was well in the Garden of Delight, except the Earth being was lonely and needed company, community. None of the other living creatures were suitable to be a true partner to *Adam*. Therefore, out of great mystery, and in a crowning moment of creation, the Lord God created a woman. And the man and the woman became one flesh in the covenant of life. There was a unity between them, a special intimacy, like the comfort between long-time lovers. And an innocence: like the nakedness of young children who don't even know they're naked. It was the beginning of human community as God willed it, and it was good.

Together the man and woman would share in the work of the Garden. Together they would enjoy the freedoms God had given. Together they would honor the boundary lines that the Lord God had set. Work and freedom and boundaries . . . all in balance . . . all of it good and beneficial for the man and

woman . . . and all of it set up by the Lord God for their happiness and wellbeing.

But even in God’s delightful garden there would be tension. Some of the creatures the Lord Yahweh made were craftier and less trustworthy than others. And there was still the matter of that tree: that lovely, delicious, tempting tree; that “dangerous” tree there in the center of the Garden of delight. The Lord God had drawn a clear boundary line in the middle of Paradise where it couldn’t be missed, right smack dab where the man and woman were forced to look at it every day and want it, even though they weren’t supposed to have it.

Then, along came the serpent. It was just a serpent—a cunning character that was also created by the Lord God and was a part of creation just like the man and woman were. But for some reason, God hadn’t warned the woman and man about its deviousness; God never told them to beware of the things it might say and try to get them to do. Perhaps God had purposely kept them in the dark as a test, to see what the man and woman would do under pressure.

The serpent spoke slyly to the woman, purposely misconstruing God’s words. “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the Garden’?” Such a clever question. How could the woman possibly answer and avoid trouble? She told the serpent what she heard, a pretty straightforward statement from the Lord: every tree in the garden was available to eat from, except for one. Only one tree was a no-no. The Tree of Life. God said to avoid that one because it would lead to death.

But the serpent responded, “You will not die; your eyes will be opened and you will be like God.”

What God had set as a boundary, the serpent made an opportunity. What had once been a cautionary prohibition for their safety was transformed into a challenge to conquer. What had formerly been accepted in faith now had to be tested and verified so as to understand and find out first hand if it was really true.

So the woman ate. And then the man ate. And the God’s clear line of demarcation was crossed. Their eyes were opened, but their new vision wasn’t what they had expected. Suddenly they saw that they were naked, and because their innocence was lost they were ashamed. They tried to cover themselves with fig leaves in an attempt to hide their nakedness and their shame, but their guilt couldn’t be covered over so easily. And the hiding and the separation—from themselves and, more importantly, from God—began.

When we hear this story—even though it’s an ancient, fairytale-like story—our hearts sink with sadness because we have lived this kind of thing ourselves; and we relive the story of Adam and Eve’s fall from grace each and every time we face temptation. And especially whenever we give in to it.

The lectionary reading from Genesis stops at the end of verse seven, but we know the rest of the story, don't we? We don't need the text to tell us how it ends . . . and how the temptation to rebel against the boundaries God has set continues to this day, through us and through every human creature God has created.

We no longer live in the Garden of Delight, but there are still plenty of serpents slithering around, tempting us, telling us that God never really said we would die. We say that we know good from evil, right from wrong, that we're intelligent enough to make our own decisions, ignore God's warnings and set our own boundaries and limits.

Or to not set any boundaries and limits at all, if we feel like it. Because, after all, we're human beings. God made us, yes; but God made us free and autonomous creatures. We have a brain to think with. We have a conscience to guide us. And when we're tempted, well . . . we'll handle it. Somehow we'll know what to do and how to do it.

And if a wily, cunning serpent comes along and tries to confuse us and twist God's words into an obscure, and even dishonest statement? . . . "You will not die. Your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God." Well, that's when we start to get pretty darn good at explaining, defending and justifying our temptations. To ourselves, to other people, and even to God.

My friends, today is the first Sunday in Lent. This is the season when we embark on a journey to the cross with Christ. The Lenten season calls us to repent from ways that lead to sin and separation from the God who made us. Lent calls us to remember that we're not the Creator in God's Garden of Delight, we're only the creatures. Lent calls us to remember the boundary lines the Creator has drawn and the limits that have been set for us to abide by as God's creatures, for our own wellbeing and happiness, so that we don't die.

In this crazy, mixed-up, dangerous, angry, deadly, broken world we live in, a world that at times seems to be coming apart at the seams with division and violence and terror, God is crying out for us to stop. And Lent is the time to heed that cry. "Stop!" says our Creator. "Have you forgotten where you came from? Have you forgotten who you are? Have you forgotten that you were created by me to live in trust of me? . . . to heed the warnings and boundaries I have set for you? . . . to care for this earth I have made to be your home? . . . to love one other because I created you to live in community? . . . and to listen to and obey me even when you don't understand why things are the way they are?"

During this Lenten season, a time for deep spiritual examination and reflection, will we finally strive to live the way God intended us earth creatures

to live from the beginning of creation? Will we finally listen to God's Word and let it be our guide? Will we be able to put our egos aside and resist the temptation to believe that our way is always the only and best way? For our own well-being? For our own survival as human beings? For our own joy and peace?

With God's help, may our answer to those questions be, "Yes." Amen.