

Hebrew Scripture: Genesis

Adam and Eve are the first representatives of the human creation. In the beginning, humanity has an ideal relationship with God. God speaks directly to them, tells them everything they need to know and gives them an unlimited supply of food. Except for that one tree they cannot eat or they will die: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve are happy, content, and well fed.

They are happy until the serpent asks Eve a cleverly crafted question, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” The serpent clearly knows what God said, but the serpent asks Eve about God’s rules in such a way that he highlights the negative. The serpent wants Eve to feel like all good food is being withheld from her so that she will desire the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The serpent’s psychology works and soon Eve is biting into the forbidden fruit. The serpent has no trouble convincing Eve that the fruit will not kill her, instead it will open her eyes, it will allow her to know good and evil, and she will be like God. Eve interprets this transformation as a chance to be wise and she cannot resist the opportunity. Really, who could resist the temptation to be like God? In her *wisdom* she shares some fruit with Adam and they both lose their innocence. This first sin of humanity is so naïve and so tragically human - to want to be more than we are.

Gospel: Matthew

Jesus is the first representative of the human re-creation, he is the firstborn of the new creation. As soon as Jesus is baptized and he is confronted with his unique calling to be the Son of God, he leaves civilization and is led by the Spirit into the desert for 40 days and nights. Jesus does not automatically know what his ministry as the Messiah is going to look like. He goes on retreat into the desert in order to pray for some insight. Any time we get close to God, the devil is also close at hand. Jesus is famished and weary and vulnerable. The devil slithers up and makes three tempting proposals to the Son of God. Each time he tempts Jesus, he uses his very identity as the Son of God as the bait to get him to bite. “If you are the Son of God, then command these stones to become loaves of bread. Prove it to me and to the world that you are the Son of God. Exercise your God given powers to do what you want to get what you want. If you are the Son of God, throw yourself off the pinnacle of the temple and let the angels catch you on the way down. If you are the Son of God, become the divine ruler over all the nations, and once you lead all of humanity you will worship me!”

Jesus has come out into the desert to discern his true path and the devil is offering him false choices that look very attractive on the surface. If you were the Son of God, wouldn’t you want to end world hunger and turn all the stones to bread? If you were the Son of God, wouldn’t you want everyone to easily believe in you because angels appear whenever you are about to stub your toe? If you were the Son of God, wouldn’t you want to rule over all the nations of the world, be a divine dictator and end the poverty and wars that plague us? All of these tempting options are not so obviously inspired by evil. In fact, they seem pretty good until Jesus uncovers the devil in the details and pushes Satan aside in favor of God.

The sin lurking within each of Jesus’ temptations is that they invite Jesus to assert himself ahead of God. Each of the devil’s interpretations of the ministry of the Messiah invite the Son to replace God. Jesus knows that even if he is trying to help other people, the moment

he puts his own will ahead of God's will his ministry will be a disaster. He must always be pointing towards the Father. Every healing, every miracle, every teaching, must be pointing people towards God or else it is inspired by the devil. In fact, Jesus must be willing to relinquish every power he has been given if it will help him be more faithful to the will of his Father. We witness this extreme faithfulness when he prays in Gethsemane and agrees to be stripped, beaten and crucified on Golgotha.

Synthesis: What is the Good News?

When this well-known Genesis story of the fall of Adam and Eve is paired with the Gospel story of Jesus tempted by the devil – we are challenged with a piercing set of questions. 'Who do we think we are?' And 'Who has God created us to be?' Adam and Eve thought that they wanted to be as wise as God. They wanted to know good and evil because it would give them independence and equality with God. However, God did not create them to be fellow gods. God created them to be humans in a relationship of dependence with God.

Their sin is the same sin that Jesus faces in the wilderness. Will he choose to be the kind of Son who usurps his Father? Or will he choose to pray to his Father in heaven and follow a path of humility and faithfulness? It is the same sin that we all wrestle with as we struggle to grow into the image and likeness of God. It is the sin of power. As human beings we are always tempted to develop and rely on our own power in place of God's power.

Now, I do not mean that we should all become weak doormats with no power in order to avoid sin. As we have all been created in God's image, we all have creative power. We would dishonor God's creation if we did not recognize and honor the power we have been given. But, when we use that power to build ourselves up in our own image, it inevitably leads to sin and distance from God. To avoid the temptations of the devil, we must exercise our power to do God's will, to grow ourselves in God's image. The more power we have, the more we must pray to be faithful to the God who gave us the power in the first place.

Reflection

What creative power has God given you?

Everyone has been given power by virtue of their creation. If nothing comes to mind immediately, ask someone you trust what power you have been given. Perhaps you have a skill that comes easily. Maybe you have a talent. Are you gifted in relationships with other people? Have you been blessed with beauty? Are you able to create wealth? Do you have artistic vision? Are you good at raising children? Do you care for those who are suffering?

How do you use your power?

How are you growing your power?

Is your power serving your will or is it serving God's will? How can you tell?

Do you rely more on your own power than God's power in your life?

Can you imagine letting go of your power and completely relying on God?

Breath Prayer

A breath prayer is a simple phrase that can be repeated in your mind with each inhale and exhale of your breath. It is meant to help you focus and listen for God's presence in your life.

Inhale: All powerful God,

Exhale: Employ my power to do your will.