

St. Francis Episcopal Church
Sermon for the First Sunday of Lent: *Sin, Temptation, and Healing*
Readings: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11
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This weekend we embark once again on the Lenten journey. (Actually the 40 days began this past week, but today is a chance to catch up if you weren't able to be here for ashes on Wednesday.) The dominant metaphor for this season comes from today's gospel reading: Jesus heads into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights as Moses and Elijah did before him, and as the Israelites spent forty years in the Sinai Desert journeying from slavery toward freedom. Jesus is led there by the Spirit to be tested—that is what the word temptation means. But it was for Jesus (and I pray will be for us as well) a time of grace as well. In the forty years the Israelites spent in the wilderness of the Sinai Desert they were given gifts for the journey: the gift of Torah, the gifts of manna and water, the gift of traveling companions. So, too, Jesus is led into the wilderness not as a punishment but as place where he gains clarity and insight and wisdom about his vocation as messiah. The wilderness can be a place to discover God in the solace of fierce landscapes, a place where we are ministered to by the angels.

Let us a time to look into the mirror and face up to our own shortcomings. But before we do that we begin this Lenten journey by offering prayers for healing, with anointing and the laying on of hands. I want to encourage you all to pray for healing in the world, among nations, and in this polarized nation of ours. I want to encourage you to pray for your friends and family members and neighbors who are struggling with illness or addiction or feelings of shame or inadequacy. We pray for health: in body, mind, and spirit.

I want to encourage you to pray, first and foremost, for your own healing. This forty days is an invitation to each of us to “work on our own stuff.” That is not selfish: it is simply common sense and good theology. As when the cabin pressure on an airplane drops and we are reminded to put on our own oxygen masks first—so, too, I think that metaphor works for Lent and for repentance and for forgiveness. We confess our own sins; not the sins of our neighbors or our parents or our spouses. We confront our own pain and weakness and insecurities; not with a sense of fear or shame, but confident of God's mercy and kindness. Lent is about entering more deeply into the truth made known at Baptism; we are God's own beloved. Each of us has been claimed and sealed and marked as Christ's own forever.

Today's reading from the second chapter of Genesis, and St. Paul's theological reflection in Romans, invite us to reflect on the human condition. We are all caught up in sin. But what does that mean? I worry about the language of sin: on the one hand are those who are tempted to see human beings and the world as morally depraved, as having no good whatsoever within us. That is not the Biblical story, however. In chapter one of Genesis it is clear that before sin there is original blessing: you and I are created good, in the image of God we are created, male and female.

In reaction to those who are fixated on sin and the wrath of God, however, are those who think it is all a matter of will: a kind of boot-straps theology where we just need to say “no” to temptation and “no” to sin. I would submit to you, however, that most of our sinning is rooted at

a very deep level in our wounds, our brokenness, or dis-ease, our fears, our insecurities. The language of addiction is enormously helpful here because I think that most of the time when we “miss the mark” not because we are bad but because we are broken.

Let me be very concrete about this. Jesus said that before you try to get the splinter out of someone else’s eye you ought to remove the beam in your own. I think he was talking about the sin of projection, namely that sometimes it’s easy for us to see and even despise in others what in truth we don’t like about ourselves. So it comes to pass that what often angers us most in someone else are those very same things that we don’t like about ourselves. Mother and daughter fight not because they are complete opposites but because they are so much alike.

When we feel most afraid, most anxious, most vulnerable—very often that is when we can become paranoid—literally we are “out of our minds.” And our judgment is distorted when that happens and our decisions are not sound and even our perceptions of reality, including our self-perceptions, become unreliable. We can get off-kilter and headed in the wrong direction. It seems to me that our deepest insecurity is that we are not good enough or loveable enough, and sometimes it is out of that insecurity that we tear others down.

So I invite you as Lent begins to take a good hard look in the mirror—an honest look, a real look at where you are in your journey with Christ. Not to do that in a shame-filled way or in a despairing way but in a way that takes stock—a way that takes an inventory of where you are and where you want to change, with God’s help, in these next forty days. But please hear these next words: I think too much of what passes for Lenten discipline is really unhelpful spiritually. I don’t think we glorify God by beating ourselves up. We need to linger at that mirror long enough to sing with the psalmist who wrote the thirty-second psalm:

Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven,
and whose sin is put away!

We need to pray that psalm until we believe it, because it goes to the very heart of what this forty-day journey is all about. In the early church the connections between Lent and Baptism were quite explicit and we must remember that as we come into this time of wilderness. We can’t forget the end of the story: the last night of Jesus’ life in the upper room, his death at Golgatha, and our songs on Easter morning about new and abundant life. We participate in that mystery with Jesus and through Jesus. Our sins are already forgiven: that is the work that Christ has done. What we are invited to do in Lent is wake up to that reality.

So we don’t need more shame or guilt in Lent. What we need to do is repent and in the Bible repentance is very concrete: it means to turn around. It means to change our patterns. It means that we need to get busy living, as forgiven and beloved people. The end of that psalm counsels God’s forgiven people to “be glad and rejoice in the Lord and to shout for joy.”

So how do we get there? I think we take stock of our lives not to wallow in guilt but as twelve-step spiritualities understand quite well, to get help from God and each other. I got a letter from one of the brothers at the Society of St. John the Evangelist a couple of weeks ago and it was an extraordinary piece of writing to receive. It was sent to me because I’m part of the Fellowship

there. The brother spoke about how he has been in recovery for many years, but that he recently relapsed into his addiction. The letter was brutally honest without a trace of shame or self-loathing. He is presently inhibited from doing the work of his ministry for a year in order to concentrate on getting well again and he was asking for support and prayers in that process.

I yearn for us to be that kind of healthy community. What if all of us could see our sin in that kind of context: as growing out of our struggles and our hurts and our pain. It doesn't mean we aren't accountable for our actions but it means we need help in getting well and in staying well. That is why we begin Lent with prayers for healing.

How does Jesus resist temptation in the wilderness? And just as importantly, how do we resist the temptations we face? It seems to me that Jesus knew who he was as God's beloved Son and what the devil is really trying to do is to make him forget that. Keep in mind that the wilderness experience in the gospels comes right after Jesus' baptism which is where the voice from heaven says literally that: you are my beloved. But the devil tries to make Jesus feel insecure in his true vocation and to settle for being simply relevant, or spectacular, or powerful. Each of the three temptations Jesus faced were not in and of themselves bad things: it's not a bad thing to feed the hungry or to trust the angels or to use one's authority to bring about justice. But the devil is crafty—and each of these temptations comes to Jesus as ways that diminish his true and deepest calling.

I suspect that many of the temptations we face work the same way, and in learning to resist them we discover (and rediscover) who we are and where God is calling us to be in ministry. We make it through Lent by taking care of ourselves, and tending to our souls, and putting on our oxygen masks, and inviting God to be with us. Real repentance—real change—comes out of that place and I pray that each of us in this parish will discover that in fresh ways as we make this journey together.