

*The Anatomy of Temptation*

First Sunday of Lent

March 9, 2014

Jill R. Russell

Texts:       Genesis 2.15-17, 3.1-7;  
              Psalm 32;  
              Romans 5.12-19;  
              Matthew 4.1-11

What expectations do you bring to Lent? Do you dread this rather dour season focused on self-denial and repentance (by which you hear guilt)? Does it seem the perfect companion for the winter that will not end? Or have you come to love this season; this time of preparation for the celebration of Easter, enjoying the introspection and reflection that the season invites us to enter.

The first Sunday of Lent always takes into the territory of temptation. We read a version of Jesus' temptation in the desert every year when Lent begins. When you consider that Jesus spends 40 days and nights fasting, you can quickly see why this season has traditionally included an element of self-denial? I want to probe these temptation stories from Genesis and from Matthew with the question of how they might set us up to see this season in a slightly different way. I wonder what God might have for us in these texts today. I wonder how a clearer understanding of the anatomy of temptation could give us insight to more fiercely and courageously follow Jesus.

If any of you have ever been given responsibility for the welfare of a growing child – whether as a parent or teacher, a coach or mentor – you know the goal is to help that child grow in knowledge. And not just to gather information, the goal is to develop discernment: the capacity to see and understand what is good and right and beautiful and learn how to avoid what is evil and wrong and destructive. We will be tracing through the gospel stories this Lent the way in which Jesus draws people into conversations that do precisely this: deepen someone's insight in a way that brings a freedom to their faith that propels them in new directions.

That's what we're after: insight, knowledge, clarity. So it's an odd moment in this story from Genesis when in the course of conversation between the woman and the serpent one of the key temptations is to have their eyes opened so that they can know good and evil. In this story having their eyes opened -which is clearly about insight and perception not physical sight - is the temptation to be avoided rather than the purpose and goal of maturity as I've just described it. How does that fit into the anatomy of temptation? Are we wrong to long for deeper insight? Is knowledge the enemy here?

You've heard me refer to Walter Brueggemann many times before. He is one of my favorite scholars of the Hebrew Scriptures. He is particularly good at lifting out the core insight to a given passage of scripture. What he hears in these verses from Genesis 2 that we read today is a description of human destiny. In this story of creation God gives to human beings "vocation, permission, and prohibition"<sup>1</sup>. Our vocation, our purpose, is to till and keep the garden; to take care of and develop the world that God has entrusted to us. We are given permission, great freedom, to move and roam and explore and enjoy the vastness of this creation. We may freely eat of every tree of the garden. But there is a limit placed on our freedom, a prohibition to not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Human flourishing, it seems, depends on understanding the relational nature of our lives: our relationship to creation - to God - to each other. We need to find our place, pursue our incredible potential and acknowledge our limitations.

What makes temptation so tricky is the way that it twists what is good and right and beautiful in very subtle ways. For example: it wasn't wrong for Jesus to want bread after 40 days of fasting. The desire to survive is innate in us - it is a gift from God. In the same way, the desire for knowledge and insight is likewise innate in us - a gift from God. What was twisted in the Genesis story was the purpose of pursuing that knowledge.

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preachings* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 46.

The serpent was inviting Eve first and foremost to distrust God. He was tempting her to believe that God was withholding something essential for her survival; that God was not to be trusted. That if she accepted any limitations, any barriers to her enormous freedom, if she accepted her humanness and her place within creation then she would be settling for something less than she deserved. Why be human when you can be God? It isn't the knowledge of good and evil that is problematic - it is the desire to BE God that gets us into trouble.

I know a question that probably comes into your mind every time you hear this story - I know it comes into mine. Why put that tree in the garden in the first place? To ask that question is, I think, to misunderstand what this story intends to teach. If you see this story as revealing to us what our human nature is like, then you can see why there must be prohibition. Wrestling with the limits of our freedom is an essential aspect of our experience as human beings.

It's a temptation that lives with us to this day. There is a strong resistance especially in our culture to believing that we have any limits at all. We define good and evil by our own standards, we do not take kindly to anyone telling us what to do, where to go, how to think, or what to believe. Delusions of grandeur are par for the course in this world in which we live. We try to create our world in a way that guarantees our own survival, that garners for ourselves as much power and control as we can find. We do this to our own peril.

Go back to this story in Genesis and look at the way that forces of alienation and death move their way into the scene. They were promised by the serpent that eating from this tree would give them knowledge - a broader, wider view of the world. But instead when they overstep their place in the garden and resist the boundaries and limits God gave them, they don't see more. They see less! They completely forgot about their vocation and purpose. There is no concern here for tilling and keeping the garden<sup>2</sup>. When they try to take the place of God, deadly forces begin to unravel the goodness and the freedom that they once enjoyed. They look

---

<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann, 48.

at themselves and their nakedness with their eyes now “opened” and they do not see the beauty God created, they feel shame. They cover themselves up and they hide. Notice (as Brueggemann points out) that God has not re-entered the story<sup>3</sup> – this is not punishment from an angry God who cannot bear to be disobeyed. The shame they feel, the alienation they experience is the tragic but natural consequence of resisting what it means to be human.

That is why many of us have come to love this season of Lent. The practices of prayer and meditation, even the practices of fasting, giving things up for Lent are not about self-denial as if all human desire is bad. These practices help us to slow down and recalibrate – remembering our place in the world, remembering our purpose and vocation, and the refreshing truth that I am not God! There are limits despite the incredible freedom and potential of human beings. I am finite, I am dust. And this is good news. It’s not all up to me! And Lent is time when we intentionally take a breath and stop pretending that it is.

If you get the opportunity to go online to Krista Tippett’s blog from her NPR radio show called “On Being” – there is an outstanding article by a pastor named Erin Dunigan called *The Induced Meandering of the Lenten Season*<sup>4</sup>. The phrase *induced meandering* comes from the vocabulary of managing rain water and run off. If you can induce meandering as that water runs down a hill so that it doesn’t run full force toward the gutter, if you can slow it down, change its course then it has the potential to soak into the soil and become a resource that nourishes the plant life and replenishes the water table. She sees Lent as doing just that for the human soul: “as in land, so in life.”

It’s a beautiful metaphor for what we are doing in Lent: slowing down, changing course, all for the purpose of letting the good news sink into us again. The stories of temptation give us a road map of what to look out for. It’s just one piece of insight meant to guide us along the way.

---

<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann, 48-49.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.onbeing.org/blog/the-induced-meandering-of-the-lenten-season/6169>

And the natural place that this insight leads us is to the table of our Lord. This is where we confess our need – this is where we find our strength – this is where the Spirit feeds and sustains our souls.

So let us come to the table of our Lord for all things are now ready.