

Lent 1
March 13, 2011
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Readings: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
Psalm 32
Romans 5:12-19
Matthew 4:1-11

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable to you, our Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. Amen.

As we can tell by the changes in the liturgy this morning, today is the first Sunday of Lent and in our readings today we are given two powerful stories about good and evil: the story of the Fall in the Garden of Eden, and the story of the temptation of Christ in the wilderness. In them are themes of sin, temptation, righteousness, salvation, love and grace. These are quite big themes, and they give us much to consider as we move through the season of Lent.

In the Garden of Eden we see Adam and Eve making a bad choice with disastrous consequences. The story contrasts for us on one hand, the life of innocence and unity with God, and on the other the life where we must forevermore bear the burden of conscience – of having to continually choose between right and wrong – and so often getting it wrong. Prior to the Fall there was no wrong or evil, only oneness with God. Now humans experience separation from God. We must live alongside evil every day, we must bear suffering, and we must choose between right and wrong. Our choices dictate how separate from or how close to God we are.

In the wilderness Jesus struggles with this burden of choice. We see Jesus making good choices, with monumental consequences. Paul's view is that Jesus' triumph over the power of evil with which he was presented set the course for the salvation of humankind. Jesus established himself as the true and worthy agent of God's redeeming love for all of us forevermore. God's gift of love is more powerful than evil. That is the good news: our human condition is such that although we fail, although we have brokenness and we do wrong, there also exists God's unconditional love and grace and it is as pervasive as the air around us; we swim in it, we bathe in it's light and it is unending and all powerful.

Themes of good and evil, temptation and triumph, grace and love; These are big themes for our consideration in Lent.

So, what exactly is our relationship with Lent; what does it mean to us; how does it affect and inform our day to day lives?

For many of us, Lent is about penitence and self-sacrifice. We come from traditions of giving things up and seeking greater simplicity. I don't know about you, but each Lent I am baffled about what I should give up and I often find myself wondering what the point of it is anyway. So we often give up things like chocolate and dessert and other things that we enjoy but think are bad for us. Maybe some of you are doing just that. We make simple dinners of soup and bread. We take on more austere living. We no longer beautify our altar with flowers. We read daily Lenten reflections or a meaningful book. We try to live a more disciplined life for 40 days.

These disciplines can all be helpful to us; especially when approached with thoughtfulness and not just obligation. At the least they change up our daily routines and at the best they bring us closer to God.

But there is another side of Lent, one that is sometimes overlooked. Because Lent is a time of self-reflection and review, we may be just a little bit more open to God. This can be a time when we invite God into our struggles, into our penitential and grieving souls; a time when we seek forgiveness and a clean heart. A time we stand open to receiving God's love and presence; a time to know and accept that we are God's beloved children. Lent is a time of renewal and affirmation. So, as often as we say *No* in Lent, no to the things we are giving up, we can equally say *Yes*, yes to God's abiding love for us.

How do we say *Yes*?

If we look at the story of the temptation of Jesus, we see several opportunities presented to him, designed to appeal to his humanness; the need for basic survival in the form of bread to alleviate his hunger, the seduction to demonstrate his power, and the greed of possibly having it all. Every offering from Satan presented Jesus with a choice that many of us might have a very hard time turning down, especially when clothed in our modern-

day desires. The text doesn't tell us whether Jesus agonized, had dark moments, whether he nearly failed; that is left for us to imagine. What it does tell us is that where he went for strength was to his faith and knowledge of right and wrong as taught by his spiritual tradition. He went straight to God. He said *Yes* to God.

[Many scholars point out that Jesus' temptation in the wilderness replicates the 40 year journey of the Israelites in their trek from Egypt to the Promised Land. The Israelites fell to temptation several times; they created false idols, they broke commandments and lost faith. Where *they* failed to keep the faith, Jesus succeeded. In so doing, he not only stands as a clear model for us but on a spiritual level, his triumph over evil paved the way for God's gift of salvation to proceed. Of course, at the end of the day, the Israelites were given the promised land, God intervened on their behalf, they were forgiven and they learned to keep turning back to God. Jesus did it without stumbling. He did it here, at the beginning of his ministry, and we will see him do it again near its end, in the Garden of Gethsemane. When faced with the temptation of avoiding his grisly death, he reached deep inside himself and found God. He made the free choice to accept his calling and allow salvation history to play out. He said *Yes* to God.]

Because there is both a *No* and a *Yes* in Lent, the lesson for us is that light is not just at the end of struggle; light is actually in the struggle all along, it is there to be revealed. **Those realities over which we struggle and grieve can be overcome by the love of God.** That is salvation. There will always be temptation for us, there will, sadly, always be evil; what we are called to do is invoke the love of God in response to temptation and evil. Lent is the journey through the times of temptation and grief that bring us to bask in the glow and the love of God. Lent is the journey that renews, refreshes, and strengthens our relationship with God. Lent is the journey that along with saying *No* to the wrong choices, it is saying *Yes* to that grace which is everpresent. Furthermore, saying *Yes* is how we reconcile the world, it allows us to participate in the dismantling of evil because every life-affirming choice we make contributes to the salvation of the world. **Every** life-affirming choice we make contributes to the salvation of the world. Small choices like making the effort to look at and listen to a friend or child with your full attention, to bringing someone who is hurting a warm casserole, to recycling your plastic, to traveling to Haiti or Honduras, to offering help to those affected by the earthquake and tsunami in Japan, to praying for the healing of the world.

And of course, this is our work, our mandate not only during Lent, but every day of our lives.

One of the Lenten activities at Epiphany this year is reading and discussing a book called *Half the Sky*. There is a discussion of this book today at noon and I encourage you to attend, if you can. This is a book full of stories about real people. I can tell you this book is not for the feinthearted, because it documents some heartbreaking and appaling attitudes and practices toward women that are surprisingly prevalent in the world. And these same stories likewise tell of the courage, spirit and the affirmation of life that can be found even in those dark places in our human experience.

In a way, *Half the Sky* is about the journey of Lent: God's love must be sought, found, embraced and expressed, especially in the dark places. Every good choice, every right action, every promotion of the love of God in every possible way and place is what we can do to affirm our relationship with God and to affirm God's presence in the world.

Every life-affirming choice we make contributes to the salvation of the world.

One often hears the expression: 'Keep a holy Lent'. With God's help, may we do that. May we reflect on our choices, actions and thoughts; keep an open heart, invite God's presence in our lives so we can be guided to right action, allow ourselves to be healed, refreshed and renewed, and bask in God's light, grace and love. May we say *Yes* to all that. And in so doing may we all, each one of us, contribute to the salvation of the world.

Amen.