

Sermon: Tested

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11**

Lectionary readings often either complement or contrast one with the other. Both of today's highly intricate stories are foundational to our faith. Most of us have heard these stories more than once over the years, I'm sure. And they are both perfectly appropriate readings to begin our five-week journey of reflection, repentance, and reconciliation. What is lost in the garden is reclaimed in the wilderness.

So, let's start with the man and the woman and the serpent in the garden of Eden.

God took the man and put him in the garden to till it and to keep it. That's all he had to know; that was his purpose. He also had to avoid eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or he else would die, which, in hindsight, didn't happen immediately. Obviously, God's threat wasn't much of a deterrent.

The story doesn't mention it, so we can't be sure, but it seems as if the man didn't tell the woman everything about the tree. She knows they shouldn't touch it or eat its fruit, but she doesn't seem to know what the tree is all about at this point. She does know about the dying part though.

The serpent says, 'no, that's not true; God just didn't want you to become like God, knowing good and evil.' If you read the story again, the serpent begins to sound like Kaa, the snake in Disney's version of *The Jungle Book* story.

So, the woman tries the fruit, realizes that's it a tasty food, and offers some to her husband, *who was with her, and he ate*, never mentioning God's warning, which made him equally guilty. Now they are really in it.

This story raises lots of questions. In all of Scripture, this is the only place where the tree is mentioned. What might it signify? God addresses the man and tells *him* about the tree, so why does the serpent approach the woman?

We can find the roots of this story in other ancient Near East writings, such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, where the woman is associated with wisdom and desire, the two

characteristics that separate humans from animals. We also find Lady Wisdom in Proverbs. In these stories, it is the women who have the desire to *know*.

This scene also highlights key elements of the God-human connection: trust, obedience, and intimacy, all of which are broken by temptation, by unrestrained craving, and alienation from God and from each other. The bottom line is, in this story, sin and death entered the world – and look what happened.

Compare that with the passage from Matthew.

‘Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil,’ in Greek, *diabolos*, and in Hebrew, *satan*, or the accuser or adversary, as in the Book of Job.

This is the very next verse after ‘a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”’ So, maybe this isn’t a random event.

Mark covers it in two verses: The Spirit *drove* Jesus out into the wilderness, then booted him from the car and took off, leaving Jesus for forty days to be tempted by Satan, to hang out with the wild beasts, and then the angels came to wait on him (Mark 1:12-13). That’s it. Mark has other things he wants us to know, and he’s in a hurry.

Matthew, of course, expands on this and it’s for a reason: his concern seems to be, okay, Jesus is the Son of God and the future ruler of God’s kingdom and all that, but what *kind* of king might he be? People want to know. For Matthew, kingship points to God, not to Rome, and the question is “Who is God?” if Jesus is God-with-us.

So, this story is really about getting those who hear it to think about how Jesus will use his power. Will it be for his own benefit, the way Herod and Caesar do it? Will Jesus choose to rule the world but be subject to Satan? Who is stronger, God or evil?

An interesting aspect to how Matthew tells the story is that Jesus and Satan – who is named only at the very end – both quote Scripture to make their points. They dip into Exodus, Deuteronomy, First Kings, and the Psalms. There are echoes of Moses and Elijah here, and that time when manna from heaven was the only available food. It’s similar to a modern-day poetry slam the way they go at it. And Jesus wins.

When I was a little kid, we had a large illustrated children’s Bible, much like the ones we have here in some of our pews. Two illustrations have stayed with me over the years: one was about the death of John the Baptist and the other showed Jesus and Satan on the high mountain right at the point where Jesus says, ‘Away with you!’ as he pushed

Satan off the mountain to fall and fall and fall. This is how we used to teach our children. If you feel your faith is a bit wobbly, get yourself one of these 1960s-era illustrated Bibles and it will straighten you right up.

Does knowing about good and evil grant us wisdom, because I don't think it's helping. Is knowing about good and evil really a bad thing? Or would we have been better off not knowing? Maybe God figured we couldn't handle it.

We've had thousands of years to get it right but somehow, we always seem to forget why we're here: to till the garden and keep it, and to work together in community. Like the man in the Garden, maybe it would be better if we just kept our head down and did the work.

Instead, we regularly embark on the quest for power, as individuals and as institutions, because it so enticing, with the serpent continually whispering in our ear. We're in the middle of another round of it now. It happens all around us in even the smallest of organizations. People desire power.

The origin of evil in the world was and remains human will. Just as the willingness of the people of Israel to live into the covenant was tested in the desert, and just as Jesus was tested in the wilderness to live into his identity as the Son of God, so are we tested to live into being the people God has called us to be. The Genesis story simply underscores our need for God's grace and for God's healing love and forgiveness.

Even at the end, when Jesus had been crucified at Golgotha, passersby taunted him, and one of them offered the final temptation: "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Matthew 27:40).

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus refused to become what Satan wanted him to be: he would not turn stones into bread; he would not test God; and he would not turn from God to gain the entire world. In refusing, he remained himself, and he remained God's.

In the verses immediately following today's story, Jesus calls his first disciples by saying, "Follow me." Follow or not; your choice. It's a test but not a temptation.

Amen.