

“Humans are (Re)Created in the Image of God!”

February 26, 2023

First Sunday in Lent

Scriptures: Genesis 1:26-27, 2:15-17, 3:1-5; Matthew 4:1-11

Genesis 1:26-27, 2:15-17; 3:1-5

1:26 Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness..." 27 So God created humankind, in the image of God they were created; male and female.

2:15 Then the LORD God took the humans and put them in the garden of Eden to nurture and care for it. 16 And the LORD God commanded them, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

3:1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal... saying to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" 2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3 but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden... or you shall die.'"

4 But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; 5 for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Matthew 4:1-11

4:1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3 The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4 But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" 7 Jesus replied, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9 and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 10 Jesus said, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.'"

Sermon

According to the dictionary, an epiphany is: "a manifestation or a striking appearance - an experience of sudden and striking realization."

Just what in the world was God thinking? Creating a wonderful garden full of luscious plants, gorgeous flowers and an overabundance of the most appealing fruits. And on top of that, there were no weeds to pull nor anything else that required breaking a sweat to fulfill every desire. Everything was good to eat - nothing poisonous - except for the fruit of one tree that stood out from all the rest, planted by God, smack dab in the middle of the garden.

Now you don't have to have a PhD in human psychology to know what was gonna happen next!

Anyone who has raised children can predict the results! Place a young child in a room full of the most wonderful toys. But just before you leave them alone to play, you instruct them that they can play with any toy, except for the biggest and brightest one sitting in the middle of all the others, well, I think we all know which toy they will go to first!

Or place a teenage boy, with a newly-minted driver's license, in a parking lot full of fancy cars while instructing him that he can drive 'em all, except for the cherry red sports car, that just happens to be sitting all by itself in the middle of the lot. Good luck with that one! (This could also apply to certain persons going through a mid-life crisis.)

So, the story, if true, seems to me to be a bit of a set up!

But perhaps the story isn't really about how those first humans, lured by great temptation, chose to disobey their Creator!

Perhaps it is a story told after the fact, after millennia of human experience, in order to explain why all humans so often make choices that are not always good for us, or that end up hurting others, as well as seemingly constantly going counter to the wishes of a very generous and loving Creator?

Like a lot of Biblical stories, it is more concerned with the why than it is about the how. And maybe, in the end, this second story of creation is more about the nature of humanity than it is about the nature of God?

What God did create, according to the creation stories of Genesis, was all good! That means it was then 100% good and 0% bad! No greed or hunger, no vices nor violence, no unmet needs but a world totally sufficient, totally equal and at complete peace or shalom.

So those first humans would have only known what was good because all of their initial experiences were only good. They only knew what was good and so they could only do that which was also good. They already had the knowledge of the "good."

But for some reason God also gave them a choice? God gave them one simple choice. Follow me, trust me - take it for granted that I only want the very best for you - to love and to be in constant intimate relationship with you.

By eating the forbidden fruit, those first humans seemed to be saying that they had doubt about the Creator's intentions to hold up his side of the bargain. They were not yet able to place their full trust in God and now their knowledge expands from knowing/experiencing only that which is good but to now also knowing and experiencing that which was not only good but as the text says, is evil.

The rest, as they say, is history, and far too often, sadly, humans have used their power of choice to choose what wasn't good?

I guess you could say that the crafty serpent was correct, the humans did not die - at least not right away - but the two were driven from that garden of nearly effortless abundance into the wilderness where they then had to labor, by the sweat of their brows, not only to feed and clothe themselves but in giving birth now to another generation who must also toil and subsequently give birth, since death, immediate or not, now lurks in the shadows and around every corner.

Death that sometimes arrives mercifully at a ripe old age, but more often, comes far too soon and violent due to wars, disease and starvation.

To be authentically human, according to Genesis, is to be an image of God. Or as Merriam - Webster says is to be a photo, video, concept, semblance, incarnation, apparition or statue of the real God!

Created good, knowing only the good and wanting to only do that which is good - but also with an ability to choose. The ability to choose a life that is fully human and lived by placing our full trust in a Divine loving Creator!

Which brings us to our second scripture passage for this first Sunday of Lent, Matthew chapter four and the story about the temptations of Jesus in the desert.

Now it is not a mere coincidence that Jesus is also given the titles of the "Son of Adam" or the "Second Adam" by New Testament writers. Because in the long game, God did not, in the end, abandon us humans to our chosen fate, but gives us a way out - a "Get out of jail, free card!" And because of Jesus the contagion of bad choices can be reversed!

Okay so you went ahead and picked the cherry red sports car (or maybe it was the pink Cadillac?) and crashed it!

Or maybe you're the second child that is placed into that room full of wonderful toys, but the only toy you want is the one the other child is playing with - so you take it.

Jesus now shows the way we call repentance and forgiveness. The curse that separates and continues to alienate us from each other and from our Divine Creator can be reversed, we can actually learn to trust again and to deeply believe that yes indeed the good will in the end prevail!

In Genesis the first humans were placed into a lush garden where they wanted for nothing, but then failed and got chased into what must have seemed to them like a wilderness.

Jesus, the Second Adam, however, chooses to begin his ministry in the wilderness where "the Devil" awaits him in order to test him with the hardest choices that humans can imagine.

But I too am thinking, "what in the world was he thinking?" After eating nothing for 40 days, the temptation to satiate one's hunger with even a few crusts of bread must have been intolerable, if not potentially hallucinogenic?

(Side note: Having travelled in Palestine, the whole place is actually covered with stones that resemble freshly baked loaves of bread!)

Now the devil knows they cannot make bread from stones and freely admits however that Jesus can. So, what's the problem here? Why not another Jesus miracle! That sounds alright to me!

But Jesus harshly replies, *"One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."*

To become authentically human again, then requires more than just the daily physical sustenance of bread, but also the regular consumption if not complete saturation by God's every word!

Humanness is lived on two parallel tracks where one is sufficient while the other is completely necessary!

But the devil doesn't give up that easily, still avoiding promises he knows that he can't keep. So he didn't promise to catch Jesus if he jumped from the tallest point God's temple - that would be silly since only God can do that!

Now this second temptation seems less clear to me than the other two, *"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" 7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to a test.'"*

So, what is exactly the test here? "Simply trying to make God do something he don't wanna do?"

But God is love and will always go out of the way to save. But maybe we don't always know what it is that is best? Maybe there are worse things even than death?

But the devil begins his temptation just like before. "If you are the Son of God..."

Maybe this test had something to do with sowing doubt? "Now if you're not sure, Jesus, if you're not sure you are the Son of God, or in God's unconditional love for you, there is a way to find out?"

Or, "If you don't trust in God's deep love for you - well then then you might as well end your life now and jump!"

Now I do not believe that in order to recover our authentic humanity, we will never encounter any serious doubts. But in our humanness we should never give in to those thoughts that maybe God does not or cannot love or forgive me!

Death can be horrible but it is much worse than living without hope, or without the experience of being loved and forgiven!

Finally, on his third try the devil did promise to deliver something. "I will make you 'King of the World!' But you have to switch you're allegiance from God to me."

Now whether he can actually deliver on his promise or not is doubtful. But, it is certainly tempting, a real biggie as far as temptations go! How many times have any of you thought to yourself, "If only I were in charge?"

I know that if I were in charge, I would end poverty, homelessness, hunger, all substance abuse, war, cancer and every disease. I'd reverse climate change and every form of discrimination and inequality. True justice and true peace would reign, if I were in charge! All my doubts, insecurities and pettiness be damned!

Now I would certainly be all in too, if Jesus were to be King! But in this case, it would not be the same Jesus - 'cause making a deal with the devil (which all great blues musicians have to do) would create the anti-Jesus! The antithesis of the real. And that kind of Jesus would make all the bad, even worse.

Now all the those bad things that I listed above; war, poverty, hunger, disease and injustice, sometimes we humans have actually been able to bring to an end!

And we are certainly capable in the future to reverse. Just like those first humans I too have a choice to believe in and to ultimately put my trust in a loving Divine Creator.

Along with the example of a real Jesus and with daily assistance and sustenance of the Holy Spirit, I too can become a part of a community of redeemed humans. New humans just like the original humans, knowing only and wanting only to experience and to do the "good." Just like God originally created everything to be.

Satan can only tease our thirst for power and our need to be significant. To choose the evil rather than the good not only just brings us more of the same, but it means everything will only get worse.

Hmm... a simple but often hard choice?

To be authentically human is to be simply what we were originally created to be - distinguishing creatures who know that they are profoundly and unconditionally loved and who then love in return all that the Lord our God has created!

That is what it means to be good!

Steve Ramer

Pastor Fort Collins Mennonite Fellowship
300 E. Oak St.
Ft. Collins, CO 80524
(970) 412-7510