

**GENESIS 2:15-17, 3:1-13 (p. 2)**

**MARCH 5, 2017**

**MATTHEW 4:1-11 (p. 785)**

**BLAINE**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

Engage our minds with your Word Lord. Quicken our spirits with your Spirit. Then move us into action in your Name, for we are your people, those who meet in the shadow of the Cross. Amen.

**“IN THE WILDERNESS”**

Okay, Bible Trivia, just to break the ice! Do you know why Jonah didn’t trust the ocean? There was something fishy about it! What biblical great had no parents? Joshua, the son of Nun! How does Moses make coffee? He Brews It! ...You know, I’m tempted to share one more! Who told the first lie, in Scripture? The serpent, the tempter! He said, “You will not certainly die, if you do what God told you, not to do. In fact, it will open your eyes, and you will be like God!” ...Our problem is we keep listening to that lie!

We are in the Season of Lent, a time of reflection, self-examination, repentance, and penitence. It started on Wednesday with what was supposed to be a simple service of Ashes. The weather distracted us though, for the fourth year in a row. It makes me wonder! Lent, by design, is a time for us to hear the truth; that we were created from dust, and to dust we will one day return. We are mortal! Someday we will die! All of us! And we are not perfect, either! All have sinned! And God is Holy, by the way, which means there is a problem!

Lent is a forty-day journey—a journey of wandering and reflection. It starts in the wilderness, just like Jesus' time of temptation in the desert. We too begin in a desolate place, perhaps even lost. But then we move, in a specific direction, and arrive at a final destination. The goal is Resurrection and New Life, with the devil gone and Angels attending! There are parallels, aren't there! And parallels with the Garden too! So how do we get there from here?

A number of years ago I was talking with the Chaplain at Jackson State Prison. We were on the subject of self-esteem, and how so many of the inmates have a negative image of themselves. I asked if he thought it was causative, or at least an indicator of future criminal behavior. And I'll never forget what he said. He said, "There was a time when I really thought that. But now, after years of working here, I believe it's just the opposite. Most of these guys end up in here, not because they think too little of themselves, but because they think too much of themselves. Most believe they are brilliant. And almost all of them are convinced that the rules of society were written for others, for less intelligent people." "The vast majority," he said, "are here because they believe that they alone have figured out how to get around the system."

Narcissism! Arrogance! Selfish ambition! A belief that you know better, that the rules don't apply to you! Did God really say, "Don't eat that fruit? Nah! There must be another explanation, another way to interpret it! At least if you want to be in charge! At least if you want to be God!"

Adam and Eve were in the Garden. Jesus was in the wilderness. So temptation is not simply situational. Adam and Eve have everything they need. It's awesome! Wonderful! They don't even have to work! And the tempter says, "If you eat from this tree your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God! Why settle for who you are, who God made you to be? Why let Him control your life? You won't die! Go ahead, you deserve it! You deserve to be happy!" "You want to know as much as God, don't you? You want to live forever, right? Why not make up your own rules then? Be your own person! Go ahead and eat from the forbidden tree!" It sounds like arrogance to me! Selfish ambition! Excessive pride!

And that theme continues in Scripture! Remember Cain, a little later in Genesis, who actually resents the Blessings that God bestows on his brother Abel, so he kills him! Jealousy! Pride! Arrogance! And then later still, there was that tower in Babel, remember, one that reached up into the heavens, "so that we can be like God"! I see a pattern, don't you? And if you look around at life, you'll see the same thing! Time-and-time again there is a "desire to be like God"! Or to actually be God! Those rules, they don't apply to me!

Don't get me wrong, pride isn't all bad. In fact it's one of the character traits we try to instill in our children, right? Be happy with who you are! Have self-confidence! Be proud of what you accomplish! Pride is good, but only up to a point. When it overflows its intended channel, or is abused, then pride, just like money or sex or power, becomes a primary cause of sin!

So let me ask you something. Does it surprise you that Jesus was tempted? He is the Omniscient, all-knowing, Omnipotent, all powerful, God Incarnate—the Alpha and Omega—the Word made flesh—the Lord and Savior of the world! And yet He was tempted. Does that catch you off guard? How about the fact that His temptation was intentional! Jesus was “led by the Spirit,” Matthew says, “led into the desert to be tempted”. Mark says that, “The Spirit sent Him out into the desert”. Jesus was tempted on purpose!

And He held up pretty well, wouldn’t you say? Far better than Adam and Eve! But Jesus was tempted. He was fully human and fully divine, remember. And temptation is a universal human condition, to which none of us is immune! So the good news here is that temptation is not a Sin! Don’t miss that, please! Temptation is not a Sin! How you respond to it, however, might be! So you need to pay attention.

Notice, for instance, that temptation doesn’t have to blindside you in order for it to be effective. Adam and Eve were clear on the “shoulds” and “should nots”. They knew! And Jesus, again, was being led by the Spirit, right? He knew!

I’ve heard it said that there are four kinds of people in the world. “Those who know, and know that they know,” “Those who know, but don’t know that they know,” “Those who don’t know and know that they don’t know,” and “Those who don’t know, but don’t know that they don’t know”! So I wonder if the Journey of Lent is designed to help us to

move from one to another!

Notice also that people are only tempted by something that touches them on a deep level.

No one is tempted by something they care nothing about! Think about it! In addition, temptation is rarely a choice between doing something bad, versus doing something good! It is far more often a choice between doing something good, but at the expense of doing something better! Let me explain.

Jesus is in the wilderness, hungry and alone. He is out in the Judean Desert, so by definition, He is hot and thirsty! He has been there forty days and nights as well, in the middle of nowhere! His lips are cracked! His throat is parched! His tongue is swollen, and sticking to the roof of His mouth! It's been almost six weeks since He has eaten! Scripture says Jesus fasted both day and night! He is hungry! When you fast, your hunger goes away after about a day or so. But then, a few days later, or sometimes weeks, on the verge of starvation, it returns. And with a vengeance!

At this point Jesus' physical strength is almost completely gone. And His emotional strength, and His mental acuity! Imagine how you would feel after all that time without food! Jesus is in a compromised position. His defenses are down. His body and mind are in a weakened state, when suddenly temptation bursts on the scene!

That's common, you know. Sometimes it is not when we are in the Garden. Maybe money is tight, and gas is three bucks a gallon, so you don't tell the cashier she gave you back too much change! Your spouse has been really grumpy lately, and that cute co-

worker asks you to lunch!

Your boss has been breathing down your neck! Your numbers are down, and the Quarter is almost over! All you need to do is cut one little deal! No one will know! Your schedule has been crazy lately! You stayed up way too late playing games or watching TV, just to unwind! Why not skip your prayer time, or your devotions, or Sunday Morning Worship even! God will understand!

It's not a choice between good and bad, is it? You need your sleep, right? You deserve it! Those Oil Companies make too much Profit anyway. I'll just use the extra to pay bills, or to help someone else out. It's just lunch, for heaven's sake! What can it hurt to be friendly? He or she treats me so nice! And that Sales deal, well, I can make that up down the line! No one will ever know! ...Remember, the temptations that hook us are the ones where arrogance gets in the way!

Jesus is hungry, and the Devil says, "If you are the Son of God then turn these stones into bread". You are the Son of God, right? You said you are the Son of God. It would prove that you are the Son of God to all of these would-be disciples here if you would demonstrate some kind of miracle? Go ahead, turn these stones into bread!

It's not just about satisfying His physical need. No, Jesus is being tempted in other ways as well! His pride, for example; "If you are the Son of God..."! And His mission; "Wouldn't turning stones into bread really impress people?" But it's even bigger than that! Have you seen how much hunger there is in the world, Jesus? What could possibly

be better than millions and millions of edible stones? First Century Social Gospel!

Then the devil took Jesus to the highest point of the Temple and said, “If you are the Son of God, then throw yourself down. Scripture says that God will command His angels concerning you. Nothing bad will happen! You believe in Scripture, don’t you?” “Again, wouldn’t that clearly demonstrate who you really are?” The Temple was located in downtown Jerusalem, at top of Mount Moriah! And the population of city was well over 50,000 and swelled to five times that during Passover! “Do you know how many people would have an instant, visual, confirmation of just who you are Jesus, if you simply step over the edge?”

“And if you are the Son of God, why don’t I just set you up to run all of the Kingdoms of the world! I’ll give you complete control over all the Nations! Think about it! No more wars! No more famine! No more economic concerns! No more problems! Everyone will answer directly to you Jesus!” What’s wrong with that? That doesn’t sound bad, does it? I can’t think of anything better than having Jesus, the Messiah, running the entire planet! Can you? I’d vote for Him in a flash! In fact, that’s exactly what happens at the End of Time in Revelation, and for a thousand years! It’s tempting, isn’t it! Let’s put Jesus in charge of the world!

But that would be doing “the good” at the expense of “the best”. That would sidestep the Cross, wouldn’t it, and our Redemption on Calvary. That would be failing to do what God has set up for Jesus to do! ...Consider then, how that applies to us! To you!

One of Satan's most powerful weapons is distorting the truth. He twists it! Just enough!

Doesn't Scripture say this? Didn't God give you those sexual appetites? Doesn't He want you to succeed? All of which may be true, even good and right! But when they are twisted, taken out of context or past their limits, done in a self-serving way, even "good things" can open up the door to Sin!

Another weapon that Satan wields, is doubt—self-doubt, doubt in those we love, doubt in our church, doubt in our faith, even doubt in the Lord! "Did God really say that you mustn't eat from this particular tree? You won't certainly die! Does the Word of God really say that, or did you just misunderstand? That can't be what that passage means!"

My God wouldn't act like that! You must be looking at it wrong. I think such and such! I want to believe such and such! God wants me to be happy, so let's just tweak it some. Adjust it a bit. Make it fit more comfortably into my life, into what I would like life to be. Drag it screaming and kicking if you have to, but for heaven's sake make it fit with my desires! Justify it in some way! Do you see those trees over there? Those are the ones you are not supposed eat from, not this beautiful tree here in the middle of the Garden!

My definition of Sin, by the way, is "anything that separates you from God"! That's what happens when we succumb to temptation! We are separated from God. Adam and Eve, when they sinned, were separated from God. Ultimately, in fact, with expulsion from the Garden! But initially, they were separated emotionally and spiritually. Then their entire

relationship started to break down!

Prior to this, they had face-to-face conversations with God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, daily, remember, which is why they were created in the first place! But now, because of their selfish rebellion, when they hear God coming, they hide! Can you imagine! Have you been there? They used to be happy with themselves, with who they were and what they did. But now they are ashamed and embarrassed! They feel naked, it says! Isolated! Guilt and Shame! They feel the need to cover up!

What a powerful tool of the enemy! He builds up walls that divide us, one brick at a time. Loved ones are led away quietly. Injured sheep are culled from the flock. God becomes someone to fear, rather than someone to love!

There is Good News though. Sin doesn't have to permanently separate us. That's the message of Lent. Stop and look at who you are, and where you currently stand. Consider how you have walked away from God, how you have hidden from God! Then remember, God came looking for Adam and Eve. God reached out, even though He knew what had happened. He called out to them by name! He even clothed them with garments made by His own hand. God still loves us, even in our nakedness, even in our shame, even when we fail! In fact, He loves us so much that He willingly went to the Cross in our place! That's the Lenten truth! That's the destination of our Lenten Journey, the Cross! And all of God's people said, Amen!

### **PASTORAL PRAYER**

We are tempted Lord, by the baubles of this world, by the things we need and things we want—the desire for control, and the prestige of position, by the right things and the wrong, and the right things for the wrong reasons. We are tempted by the things we love. Mostly Lord, we are tempted to do the good at the expense of the best. We fail to take the time required with you, and the energy needed in prayer, in order to discern your will, not ours. Our sin comes from willful disobedience some times, but often, just from not taking the time to be still in your Presence. Help us Lord, especially during Lent, to do just that.

Help us to be like Jesus, and know your Word, and apply it in our daily lives. Help us to know when the enemy is twisting your truth, to rationalize something that is wrong. And help us to listen, better than Adam and Eve, so that we won't be ashamed to stand before you. Keep calling Lord. And keep enabling us to respond.

We have come to you now, Lord, because we have heard you calling. We've come to repent, and have come to confess. We've come to you in this Season of Lent, reflective and self-aware. So we've come to you humbly as well, in order to bow before you and ask forgiveness. Heal us Lord, in the ways we need most. And be with our loved ones as well. We lift up..... We speak their names aloud Lord, and lift their lives within our hearts. May you bless them mightily in the days ahead! We ask these things Lord, together, as the Body of Christ. And we do so with the very prayer that Jesus taught to us saying, Our Father...