



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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A Higher Calling Than Private Morality

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 9, 2014
The First Sunday in Lent—Based on Genesis 2:15-17;3:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11*

When I last preached, I was confronted with Jesus' words about divorce and some accompanying hot button issues. It was a touch grim, but I did my best. A bit later that same day I ran into a couple, whom I had not seen on Sundays for several weeks. As people often do, upon seeing me they commenced to tell me why they had not been in church. Parenthetically this is not necessary; however, if wanting to avoid explaining makes you come more regularly, I am not against it. The wife in the couple then told me that her husband had in fact been in church alone on the morning of that sermon. She said that upon returning home, he said to her with some urgency, "Honey, we have got to get back to church soon. While we were away the Verger shaved his head and Buddy has gone to preaching on divorce, lust and adultery! What is the world coming to?"

And now today: Jesus' temptations in the wilderness and the Fall of Humankind! Lord, have mercy! It must be Lent. I don't remember many of the sermons I heard as a child; however, I do remember hearing a couple preached on this passage from Genesis. It was particularly titillating to hear the preacher say the word "naked." I actually remember glancing at my mother the first time I heard it, my eyes wide open as though asking if he could really say such a word in the pulpit!

What are we to do with such passages? For better or worse, they deserve our earnest thought and prayer. The Genesis story, though, however mythically important it is in its claim about our desire for being the lord of our own lives, is so fraught with cultural and theological overlay that it requires more unpacking than time allows today. It has great potential for jokes, which by and large are old and tired. Many of us see Adam and Eve as symbolic rather than literal beings, a fact which makes speaking of them as husband and wife somewhat disingenuous. Even still, Adam's "Eve made me do it" lives in a long line of feeble attempts on the part of husbands to blame their wives for just about everything—rarely to good end.

But in the power of language, even and perhaps particularly in texts revered as sacred, there is, I believe, a darker side to these short verses. The interchange between Eve and Adam in this ancient campfire story no doubt has been one of the underpinnings of the belittlement and even occasional demonization of women—and particularly strong women. Further, the seeming punishment of their sin—that nakedness before one another became shameful—has done its particular number on our sexual selves. And, finally, St. Augustine's expanse of this story into a hard and fast doctrine of original sin, coming to be understood as abject depravity, has not resulted in the finest chapter of our faith narrative. Yes, we sin, but inherently depraved? Not on your life. We, all of us, bear in our souls the divine spark of God no less, a fact that deprives us of total depravity. What truly was an ancient people's mythic explanation of the complexity of life in a pre-historic era was never intended to be heard except in the broadest and most poetic renderings.

The New Testament account of Jesus' struggle with the Tempter, itself not uncomplicated or fully understood by me or anyone else, takes the discussion of sin to an arena that is somewhat more accessible—though for me a talking Satan is only slightly less metaphorical than a talking snake. And, yet, I must say that to imagine the luring and attractive words of a force I call Evil is not a giant leap but a daily event. Consider what Satan invited Jesus to do: to create food for everyone in a land in which so many hungered, to perform a showy act of miraculous power that would have attracted many to him, and to assume an earthly monarchy. Our being tempted to do such things literally is largely nonsensical to us: our life narrative does not involve such possibilities. I can't remember the last time I was urged to become a monarch! But when these temptations are viewed for what they really are—the call for Jesus to abandon his vocation, his reason for being, then they in various iterations, quite personally known to us, become realistic, demanding and profoundly understandable.

Not farfetched at all, these are archetypal examples of what each of us in our full humanness faces. How, they ask us, do we parse the difference between the material and the spiritual part of our lives? When is enough enough, when are the stones we turn into bread hoarded and when are they shared? This passage questions the ordering of our lives—the portion of it given over to work, the amount allocated to those whom we love, the message our style of living states about our values. Not small issues, these, but the questions of our lives.

And in what manner do we regard power? Though not a one of us is a monarch, each of us has the agency of personal power, some greater than others, but all bound by the principles of genuine stewardship. Is our power for good or ill, and what does the possession of power cause us to think of ourselves? How does our power affect the least of these?

In some ways the most nuanced of the temptations is what the Australian theologian William Loader calls the “spirituality of sensationalism.” How big and dramatic must our God be to satisfy us? This grave issue is alive and well in the church today. We often hitch our beliefs and our faith onto the outcomes we name and demand in prayer, seeking a God who manipulates the order of creation to suit us, healing this disease, preventing that disaster, granting us this great wish or that adventure. Jesus, I believe, was tempted to avoid living the *real* life he had come to show us, tempted to opt for magic over responsible human behavior, to chose manipulation of natural events over offering himself, the spirit of God's holy presence.

These, my beloved friends, are the real temptations; these are the paths of life that separate us from God. The early church, in its understandable desire for a code of living, in fact its perceived need for a literal return to the household codes of behavior—men do this, women do that—too quickly gave up on the huge demands demonstrated in the story of Jesus' temptations. And through the ages our version of that avoidance has found voice in our emphasis upon private morality, how tenaciously each of us follows an external code of behavior. Some of the most moral people I have ever known—people who wouldn't cheat on their income tax if you held a gun to them, wouldn't say a bad word no matter what, wouldn't cheat on their spouse under any circumstances—are also among some of the meanest people I have ever known and the most unhappy because in the big issues of ordering their lives in ways that go way beyond personal shortcomings, they are blind. They/we/I—all of us on occasion—live in sin because we fail to be what God wants us to be, to be what in fact we have been created to be.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus kept his eye on what he had come to do—to fulfill the will of God—which, of course, is never as easy as it sounds. It wasn't for Jesus, and it isn't for us. What is the will of God for us? Surely answering that question is a huge part of what it means for us to work out the details of our salvation. It is indeed the project of our lives, but I believe there are clues in the life of Jesus that will lead us if we follow. **Love** when being unloving would come so easily; **forgive** when holding a grudge would on the surface be so much more satisfying, particularly when we were right in the first place; **live** with insight and priority and

contemplation even when all around us are the walking dead, those whose lives are unbalanced and on autopilot without a meaningful compass.

Lent is an annual occasion that asks us to evaluate where we truly are on this journey of ours. A close look breaks our heart, as it should—not to crush us but to open us to a better way. The Good News of Christ is as joyful in the sobriety of Lent as it is in the extravagance of Easter: our enslavement to sin is not inevitable. God has made us in such a way that if we desire to do so we can with God's grace live balanced lives in truly righteous ways. Of course, we are not perfect at it; some days we are so off we could jump out of our skin. But the message of Lent is to come back, to come back to what is real and true about our lives, to come back to God.

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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