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Lent 1, Year “A” Tempted in the Wilderness

Irvine United Congregational Church, UCC
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Hebrew Testament Reading *Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7*
New Testament Reading *Matthew 4:1-11*

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There is a growing movement for churches to call this Sunday, “Evolution Sunday,” and today, more than 800 churches are calling attention to the fact that science and religion are not mutually exclusive.

The United Church of Christ has created a statement that will be available to you on the home-page of our web site called, “A New Voice Arising.” It is there to counter the refutation of evolution by creationists, as well as to invite those who devote their lives to scientific inquiry into our faith communities. Our newest motto is, “For too long, science and faith have had a combustible relationship. But even churches evolve.”

Intelligent Design is a theory that starts off with the promising word, “intelligent” and then devolves into rehashed creationism. If only it left off with the statement that the universe had to have been created by an intelligent designer that we name, “God,” then I could sign right on. But its aim is to debunk science and cling to stories such as we have in Genesis for their “factual” truths, rather than the universal truths the stories point to.

Here is a quote from the United Church of Christ’s pastoral letter on science and religion, just in time for this Sunday:

“Evolution helps us see our faithful God in a new way. Our creator works patiently, calling forth life through complex processes spanning billions of years and waiting for us to awaken and respond in conscious participation in God’s own overarching dream for all living things. Evolution also helps us see ourselves anew, as creatures who share a common origin with other species. Today we know that human bodies and brains share the same genetic and biochemical processes with other creatures, not just mammals but insects, plants, and bacteria. How then

should we understand ourselves as evolved creatures, sharing much of our DNA with other species, and at the same time as distinct creatures in the image of God?¹

With that, I want to look at today’s scriptures specifically not from the viewpoint of factual truth, but rather with an eye on the universal truths they share with other cultures and times. The similarities are striking.

I think it would be safe to say that the theme of today’s scriptures is “temptation.”

I don’t know how many of you have felt temptation lately, but I was reminded that someone once said that being middle-aged means that when presented with a choice of two temptations, you will choose the one that gets you home earlier.

But the issues surrounding “temptation” are universal. They are described in different traditions around the globe, and curiously, the stories are very similar.

The Bassari people of Africa have a story dating way back into their own lore that tells of a god called Unumbate. Unumbate created man and called him “man.” He created woman and called her “woman.” He created an antelope and called it “Antelope.” Then he created a snake and called it “snake.”

Unumbate gave them a garden and told them not to eat any of the fruit. One day the man and the woman decided to eat some fruit, and Unumbate came down and asked them who told them they could do that. They said, “Snake did.”²

At least in *our* scriptures the snake actually did something. It is safe to say that in many of our religious traditions, serpents don't come out too well. Blame the snake.

In Native American culture long ago, youths would go away in solitude to prepare for manhood. There is a story about temptation and a snake that is native to America as well, and it became a well-known story that you may have heard.

There was a youth who hiked into a beautiful valley, green with trees, bright with flowers. There he fasted. But on the third day, as he looked up at the surrounding mountains, he noticed one tall rugged peak, capped with dazzling snow. "I will test myself against that mountain," he thought. He put on his buffalo-hide shirt, threw his blanket over his shoulders and set off to climb the peak. When he reached the top he stood on the rim of the world.

He could see forever, and his heart swelled with pride. Then he heard a rustle at his feet, and looking down, he saw a snake. Before he could move, the snake spoke.

"I am about to die," said the snake. "It is too cold for me up here and I am freezing. There is no food and I am starving. Put me under your shirt and take me down to the valley."

"No," said the youth. "I am forewarned. I know your kind. You are a rattlesnake. If I pick you up, you will bite, and your bite will kill me."

"Not so," said the snake. "I will treat you differently. If you do this for me, you will be special. I will not harm you."

The youth resisted awhile, but this was a very persuasive snake. At last the youth tucked it under his shirt and carried it down to the valley. There he laid it gently on the grass, when suddenly the snake coiled, rattled, and leapt, biting him on the leg.

"But you promised..." cried the youth.

"You knew what I was when you picked me up," said the snake, and it slithered away.

Listen to the echoes of the story of Jesus going out in solitude and being set upon a pinnacle, with the face of temptation represented by the devil. This story of temptation has been told in different ways in cultures other than our own. The gospel story told in Matthew and the Native American story both point to the same truth. In one, it is a story of resisting temptation in the face of evil, and in the other it is a story about giving in, yet both present the same idea—that temptations, when you know about the consequences, have to be resisted.

Similarly, the Bassari people in Ghana had a story that mirrors our own creation story. There is only one connection I know of between the ancient Hebrews and Ghana, which is on the western side of the African continent. And that connection is in the discovery that human life started in Africa, and therefore the oral tradition about the Garden of Eden is older than we know.

Stories, then, can be universal. Myths can be true when the story they tell points to a truth that resonates with the people who hear them.

In three cases, we hear about the consequences of yielding to temptation. In the story of Jesus, we hear about standing firm in the face of temptation.

When we hear stories, especially those that have counterparts in other traditions around the globe, sometimes we may not take them very seriously, thinking that they lose their truth by not being found to be a "one-and-only original" instead of the opposite. Truths are universal—the facts behind them are not as important.

The New Testament really wants us to know about the temptation of Jesus. Matthew tells us plainly that Jesus was in the wilderness tempted by the devil. He did not say Jesus wondered, imagined, was charmed, or that he considered his options. He tells us he was *tempted*, and that he *went there* to be tempted. Mark tells us he was tempted. Luke tells us he was tempted. John

does not take time to mention it, as he was in too big a hurry to get Jesus back up to Galilee. However, the book of Hebrews tells us, “He was in all points tempted like as we are.”

The city of Jericho isn't far from the place where Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. You can stand there in Jericho and look up into the Judean hills to a place called the Mount of Temptation. It is easy to imagine Jesus being up there by himself, fasting for forty days, alone and hungry, struggling with what he would do and how he would do it.

Surely, he must have thought of some easy ways to do what he had to do. That was the temptation of his life. So, there we see him. He was tempted. From the scriptures, we can see that he was tempted by three things.

Jesus was tempted by the wrong use of power. That was the first temptation.

Jesus was also tempted by the wrong way to popularity. That was the second temptation.

Finally, Jesus was tempted by the wrong kind of partnership. That was the third temptation.

In other words, the story of Jesus being tempted is the story of all temptation: the quest for power, the desire to be known and well liked, and in making the wrong personal associations in order to achieve these personal gains.

We are each of us tempted every day. Separating the importance of doing what is right out from doing what will “probably do no harm” as long as it will be the choice that will benefit or enhance us, is muddy when our egos are involved.

We've seen this demonstrated in our primaries when candidates say anything to muddy their opponents' positions or reputations, even going as far as to create new personas for themselves that do not jibe with their records. A lot is at stake. There has also been the temptation in this process to debase our global political rhetoric by choosing to make defaming remarks about other nations rather than by recommitting to being peacemakers in the world. Peacemaking is a big part of the gospel message.

Temptations are everywhere these days.

Tom Long, my preaching professor and one of America's top twelve preachers talks about how in the midst of South Africa's struggle against apartheid, one of the most respected voices for racial harmony and human dignity has been that of Bishop Desmond Tutu. But even the closest colleagues of Tutu are sometimes distressed by the bishop's tolerance and moderation. They wish he would be more aggressive with his opponents. One of them said, “At his age you'd think he would have learned to hate a little more. But there is this problem with Tutu: he believes in the gospel message.”

What he was saying, in effect, is that Tutu knows who he is, remembers what his baptism means, knows the gospel story, and he will not change the script.³

At a time when we need to hear stories of integrity from and about our captains of industry and government leaders, I found a book called, *Velvet Glove, Iron Fist*, by the founder of Panasonic, Konosuke Matsushita.⁴ In it, he tells this story.

In China's later Han era, there lived a politician called Yang Zhen, a man known for his upright character. After Yang Zhen was made a provincial governor, one of his earlier patrons, Wang Mi, paid him an unexpected visit. As they talked over old times, Wang Mi brought out a large gold cup and presented it to Yang Zhen. Yang Zhen refused to accept it, but Wang Mi persisted, saying, “There's no one here tonight but you and me, so no one will know.”

“You say that no one will know,” Yang Zhen replied, “but that is not true. Heaven will know, and you and I will know too.”

Wang Mi was ashamed, and backed down. Subsequently Yang Zhen's integrity won increasing recognition, and he rose to a high post in the government.

Human nature is weak, and we tend to yield to temptation when we think nobody can see us. In fact, if there weren't a police force, many people would not hesitate to steal. This is not to say that when we do something bad, we feel no compunction at all, just that being human means to be prone to weakness and temptation. But even if nobody witnesses our sins, and not a soul knows of them, we cannot hide the truth from the eyes of our conscience. In the end, what is important is not that other people know, but that we ourselves know.

Matsushita is writing about leadership in business, but speaks to a broader audience when he says, "A person who sins neither in thought nor deed, and is fair and just, gains enormous courage and strength. As a leader, you need courage born of integrity in order to be capable of powerful leadership. To achieve this courage, you must search your heart, and make sure that your conscience is clear and your behavior is beyond reproach."

When I think of some of the temptations that have crossed my own path, some resisted, some given in to, I imagine that what the scriptures today, as well as what the stories from other traditions point to, leave us all feeling that we have come up short. I imagine that they might make us feel a little alone and broken.

We all go into the wilderness. Some are just going in, some have been in a while, and some are at last re-emerging. (For we go in more than once in a lifetime—there are many wilderness places in our lives.) In these times we are offered the wrong answer, the wrong choice—the wrong use of power, the way to popularity, the wrong kind of partnership or way of being in partnership.⁵

This is the first Sunday in Lent. The faith stories that are presented to us in this time remind us of what it feels like to be alone in the wilderness; how to be there, where to look for healing, where to find help. This is when we remember that our tradition tells us that God has called us each by name: "This is my beloved daughter. This is my beloved son, and this, and this, and this, in whom I am well pleased."

And, you remember that because God has called us to be here and to be fully human, we are not alone. After all, we share everything in our common origins with all creation from whence we have evolved to become the people who remember our connection to the source, even in our own time in the wilderness. AMEN

Sermon Resources

- 1) "A New Voice Arising: A Pastoral Letter on Faith Engaging Science and Technology," John H. Thomas and the Collegium of the UCC, January 31, 2008
- 2) Joseph Campbell, loosely quoted, from "The Power of Myth" with Bill Moyers
- 3) Thomas G. Long, "Whispering the Lyrics," CSS Publishing Company.
- 4) Konosuke Matsushita, "Velvet Glove, Iron Fist," PHP Institute, Tokyo
- 5) Thomas A. Pilgrim, loosely re-worded from "The Man from Galilee," CSS Publishing Company.

Scripture for Sunday, February 10, 2008
Lent 1A "Tempted in the Wilderness"

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

2:15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.
2:16 And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden;
2:17 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 that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" 3:2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3:3 but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'" 3:4 But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; 3:5 for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

3:6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. 3:7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Matthew 4:1-11

4:1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.
4:2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 4:3 The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4:4 But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" 4:5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 4:6 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.'" 4:7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 4:8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 4:9 and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 4:10 Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" 4:11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.