

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer

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“Temptation in the Garden and the Wilderness”

Genesis 2:15-17; 3: 1-7; Matthew 4: 1-11

In the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had everything they could possibly need or want: food, companionship, beauty, a personal and friendly relationship with God, meaningful and enjoyable work tilling and tending the garden, harmony with nature, trust – everything, really. That’s what the garden symbolizes – the goodness and harmony of God’s creation, paradise on earth. The just-rightness of life. Only one prohibition was given to the human creatures: do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Everything else in the garden was theirs to use and enjoy. Just one thing was off limits. But they broke God’s command and ate of the tree anyway, and life was never again the same. Banished from the garden forever, Adam and Eve were forced to eke out their existence on their own. When living in the midst of plenty, when living in perfect paradise, Adam and Eve still gave in to temptation. 99% of the garden wasn’t enough. They wanted it all. And their disobedience was costly, wasn’t it? For the sake of a tasty piece of fruit, and the thrill of doing something sneaky and risky, Adam and Eve lost a whole way of life. No longer did God walk in the garden with them at the time of the evening breeze; no longer was creation a blessing. Now they had hard work to do.

Now they would experience the harshness of life. They would know all about pain and suffering and heartache and grief and guilt and shame. For the sake of having just one more thing, they lost everything. When faced with an important choice, Adam and Eve chose the easy way, rather than God's way. They chose the way of short-term pleasure and satisfaction. Even though they had more to eat and more to enjoy of God's creation than they could possibly ever need, still they gave in to the temptation to have what they didn't already have. Surrounded by comfort and ease, Adam and Eve made the wrong choice. When it came to what matters, Adam and Eve settled for less. They chose short-term pleasure over long-term salvation. They chose themselves over God.

Now contrast their experience in the garden with Jesus' experience in the wilderness.

And what do we see? Jesus, hungry, weak, alone, perhaps even afraid, perhaps full of important questions about who he is and what God expects from him, still manages to stay no to the devil, to the tempter. He says no to food. He says no to political power. He says no to spiritual authority. He says no to anything that would serve himself. He says no to anything that would promote himself at the expense of God's will for his life.

Wow! Adam and Eve have everything and they can't say no to just one piece of fruit?

And Jesus, being tested in the wilderness for forty days can't say yes to just one little miracle?

That's the difference between the garden and the wilderness. In the garden we are so comfortable we forget how much we need God. In the wilderness we learn that without God we really don't have anything at all. Jesus could have done what the devil suggested. Jesus could have relied on his special status as God's Son and been released from his physical hunger. He could have stormed into Jerusalem as the political messiah everyone wanted and taken over the world. He could have been flashier and wowed the crowd with his high-risk stunts and amazing feats. And in the end, Jesus could have demanded that God remove his suffering and rescue him from the cross. It's not that as God's Son Jesus couldn't have done what the devil suggests. The temptations were real, and within the realm of possibility. But not if as God's Son Jesus is to be the savior of God's people. Not if he is meant to fulfill the role of God's suffering servant for the sake of the world. Not if Jesus is to be God's love in the world. And so, trusting in God and God alone, Jesus says no to the tempter. He'd rather have nothing in the wilderness and still be faithful to God than to have everything in the garden and hurt his relationship with God.

The word “lent” comes from the old English word “Lenten”, which means spring. But as another preacher puts it, this isn’t just a reference to the last weeks of winter that lead to spring, or Easter, but it’s also an invitation to a spring time for the soul. Forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone. Forty days to remember what it is like to live by the grace of God and not by what we can supply for ourselves. Most of the time, you and I live in the garden. Much of the world’s people don’t, but for the most you and I and the majority of Christians in America, do. We are surrounded by everything we could want or need. Most of us here probably never go to bed hungry. Chances are our homes have most of the basic necessities of life -- running water, electricity, heat, furniture, appliances, clothes, food. Chances are our homes have more than the basic necessities: cable television, stereo or surround sound systems, collectibles, decks or patios, saunas, computers, game systems, recreation rooms, etc. We have access to good transportation, and the walk from house to garage isn’t that hard. We live in a comfortable garden. Why then do we keep wanting more, and why does disobedience to God come so easily? Why is it so hard to be faithful when we have everything we want?

Lent is an opportunity to experience the wilderness. At least it can be. A time to get down to the basics in our relationship with God, pushing away all the stuff that clutters our lives and get right down to the nitty-gritty. Do I trust God or not? Can I say no to those things that go against God or am I too attached to them to let them go? Do I need the approval of others more than I need God? Am I too dependent on myself and rely too much on myself? Am I materialistic? Am I selfish? Do I care more about being happy than I do about being and doing good? Do I do what is convenient or do I do what is right? Have I grown so accustomed to a comfortable life that I don't care whether my comfort comes at the expense of others? Is my heart hardening? Am I stuck in habits that I know are wrong or harmful but don't have the energy or commitment or desire to change? Do I keep receiving more than I give? Lots of questions – and probably too many to string together -- but they are real questions, and just the kind of questions for Lent. They are wilderness questions for people who live in the garden. And something the Bible seems to teach us is that without the wilderness we don't really grow in our faith or really understand our faith. For in the wilderness we lose the comforts of the garden, and either we complain and give in to the temptation to take care of ourselves, or we turn to God and trust in God's love to sustain us in the wilderness.

I invite you to participate in a wilderness adventure this Lent. Not with backpacks in the mountains, not on skis or dogsleds, not in canoes or river rafts – but in your own soul. Start out by telling the devil to get lost, and then let God guide you the rest of the way. Worship only God -- only God -- not your self, not your church, not your family, not your stuff, not your job – only God. For only God can be your trail guide. No one else is as reliable or as helpful or as good. No other guide will carry you through the deep water. No other guide will be as kind or as loving. So worship only God. And decide again to serve God -- to serve God with your whole life. Decide again that you belong to God, and that God's way will be your way. It's the way Jesus went – from the wilderness to the cross. From temptation to death. That's the Lenten journey. But, you know, there's another garden on the other side, and if we stay with Jesus, we'll get there. So don't settle for less. The way is hard, but isn't salvation worth it? Are you ready? Think now about these things. And do not be afraid – for the God who Jesus was able to say “yes” to in the wilderness of temptation is the same God who wants you to say “yes” as well, and when you do, he will gladly strengthen you -- not only for this wilderness journey of Lent, but for your whole journey of life and faith. So trust him – trust God -- today and all the days ahead. Amen.