

## Neo-Genesis

02/26/2023

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

Matthew 4:1-11

We all know the story of Jesus in the wilderness. It's a popular passage every year for this first Sunday in Lent as we have just begun our 40-day journey with Jesus to the Cross. By now, that thing we've given up for Lent is tempting us to give in, and with any luck, we haven't caved to temptation just yet. So, it's only natural that we read this story, since it gives us this image of what it is to resist temptation and to truly resist giving into eating, doing, or saying what we've given up for Lent. However, in reading this passage, an odd question crossed my mind: Why does Jesus endure this trial at the very beginning of his ministry? In other words, why, when he has just been commissioned to minister to God's people to save them from their sinfulness, is he driven as far away from society and other humans as possible and faced with the personification of Sin itself? It sounds a little backwards, does it not? The truth, though, is that this isn't backwards. It is in fact very much intentional. It is another moment, as we spoke about last week, where an ending sparks a new beginning. Just what is being ended and started, though? As it turns out, what Jesus endures in the gospel reading for today directly parallels what Adam and Eve endure in the reading from Genesis, down to the very order in which they happen.

For example, in both stories, whether that of Adam and Eve or of Jesus' ministry, these stories have just begun. Each person has just been commissioned to a particular task. For Jesus, it was preaching and teaching the way to God, caring for the sick, and calling all persons back to God's fold. For Adam and Eve, it was to care for Creation, to protect it and allow it to thrive. At this point in both stories, all three of them are pure and untainted by Sin. Then, a tempter steps into the picture, twisting God's words in an attempt to confuse his target. In fact, the temptations Jesus faces are direct parallels to the reasons given that Eve partakes of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, down to their very order. The difference, though, lies in the reaction to those temptations.

Firstly, after the serpent has said its piece in the Genesis reading, we picture Eve looking at the Tree, and the first thing we're told is that "she saw it was good for food." In other words, it provides sustenance. This plants those initial seeds of doubt, because, if this tree is good for food and therefore sustenance, why would God put such a high price on partaking of this tree, something that produced a food source presumably for sustenance? In the gospel reading, this is the first temptation Jesus faces: the Devil appears and tells him to turn stones to loaves of bread that he might eat and be sustained. Unlike Eve, though, he holds true to God's commands and resists temptation. He doesn't doubt that God will sustain him and carry him forward, whereas Adam and Eve take matters into their own hands to sustain themselves, indicating a certain level of autonomy in their minds and therein separation from God. It doesn't stop here, though.

The next perception we are told Eve has of the Tree is that "the fruit are pleasing to the eye." In other words, they look delicious. However, there's only one way to test that theory: to eat of the fruit, a direct violation of what God says not to do. Additionally, though, to eat of the fruit, Eve must first touch the fruit, a rule that God does not give but that she cites as a rule to the serpent nonetheless. So, to test whether this fruit is as delicious as it looks, she must break

God's rule, and therefore put to the test just how to the letter God's punishment will be. In the same fashion, the Devil takes Jesus up to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem, misquotes the Word of God in an attempt to confuse Jesus, and tells him to throw himself off. However, Jesus does not give into this Second Temptation of Eve, putting God to the test. He resists for a second time, something Adam and Eve failed to do.

Finally, we get to the Third Temptation of Eve. She sees this fruit, sees it's good for food and it looks delicious. Now the true temptation seeps in: if she eats this fruit, she will be wise and godlike, just like God Themselves. This is the last test for Jesus as well. The Devil takes him to a mountaintop, shows him all the kingdoms of the world, and says he will give Jesus all the power and authority to rule these kingdoms if he will just bow down and worship him. One final time, Jesus quotes Scripture, sending away this tempter. Thus, in every instance where Adam and Eve failed, Jesus succeeds, and there is a very particular reason for this.

What we have, then, in the gospel reading is a Neo-Genesis, a "new beginning." Jesus, just as innocent and pure, just as human as Adam and Eve, is faced with the same temptations as Adam and Eve. Just like the first man and woman, he is faced with the temptations to be godlike, self-sustaining, and fearless of God, but with one distinct difference: he succeeds where they failed. Despite the temptations to be self-sustaining, to question God, and to be like God, Jesus does not give in to these temptations. Thus, he breaks the cycle, starting something new for all humanity. In the same way, we have this same opportunity right here and right now. Every day, we face a Neo-Genesis, a new beginning, of our own, just as Jesus faced one in the reading. However, the choice is ours to make: to be an Adam or Eve, giving into temptation, or to be like Jesus, holding strong in our faith that God will provide and carry us through. So, I ask: Which will you choose for your Lenten journey?