

Sermon

This One is Still Whispering...

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Bacon Memorial Presbyterian Church

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I grew up not far from here in a beautiful home on Eggert Road in the Town of Tonawanda. When I was born, we lived in a modest home on Legion Drive in Kenmore but moved to the house on Eggert when I was about two years old. I have very fond memories of that house. I had a playroom in the basement where I spent a lot of time, we had a yard I enjoyed, a pool and though it was on a busy street, I knew nothing else so I liked it – people, friends beeped as they drove by, and everyone knew the red house on the corner as it was referred at the time.

I had a nice bedroom and the house often waft of my mother's expert cooking and baking. I did nothing to earn this existence, I just happened to be born to Sandy and Ben Elkington who purchased that house and made it our home. Now while I had much freedom to enjoy the house, I certainly rules I had to obey. As you can imagine, living on a busy road, going in the street for any reason, even to chase after a forlorn ball, was strictly prohibited. In those days, we didn't have cell phones, we had good old rotary phones but I was lucky enough to grow up in the era where you had several phones throughout the house. Well we weren't aloud to use the phone without permission but when my friends were over we would play with phone as part of our imaginary play. Well on this day, one of my "crafty" friends dared me to call the operator which you could do but just dialing zero. But more than just call her, they wanted me to call her a name.

Well, the voices of my parents rattled in my young mind but after persuasion, I did

Inspired by Feasting on the Word, Year A commentary on Matthew 4:1-11 by Maryetta Anschutz and commentary on Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 by Allen C. McSweeney Jr. Comments featured Rise, An Authentic Lenten Devotional, by John Pavlovitz, #11 p. 20-21.

it. And the operator turned our phone off. She called my mother who gave me the proverbial line, “wait until your father gets home”. And there punishment dished out at that point. And I lost some of my freedoms and I lost some of my innocence because I gave into to temptation – temptation to be bigger than myself, to look important or even powerful in a child’s world. It obviously made a fairly strong impression me because I remember it to this day.

Oh that scripture from Genesis we all know so well – or do we? It is often misinterpreted as the devil tempts Eve and Adam – but that’s not stated here. It is not the devil, it’s a crafty snake. Crafty...not evil necessarily – just clever in the way that he words things. *“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”?’ The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 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.”’ But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’* What the serpent does is make Eve question what God really meant, kind of twists God’s words in a way. And Adam was not help – he knew the rules just as much as Eve. Eve kind of gets the bad wrap here – they were equally at fault...they both partake. And maybe they do because they want to see what God sees but they have no idea what that means. But we do. We live beyond this moment. We live with the eyes and ears post fruit of the forbidden tree eaten. It’s not hard to interpret what is God’s way and what is not. Yet we

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struggle anyway. Just as the fruit of the tree in the story appears “good ... a delight...and to be desired to make one wise”, so the freedom to determine for ourselves “good and evil” appears enlightened and liberating. But we know too well that when we truly believe we know better than others, either individually or as a people, we know where this leads...down paths of messy divorces, shouting matches between parents and children, to willful disregard of the needs and feelings of others, to chaos in the church and to degradation of the environment.

We continually rebel against constraints. We turn the expansive freedom that is ours in Christ into ideologies of freedom that keep us at the center and yield predictable results. And yet God does not bring death as He had said in this moment. In this early passage, God shows his mercy and grace to his creation and continues to provide restraints to help us avoid the sin we are so easily attracted to in this life.

Our scripture from Matthew brings this new leader, this messiah, face to face, with evil – with the devil, who tries to do what the serpent did in the garden. But this time, Jesus is not having it. This time the creature that the devil is talking to is different by one very important measure – this leader, this man, this messiah, is selfless. The choices Jesus makes are not for himself but the betterment of His relationship with God and His relationship with others. This scripture presents itself here at the beginning of Lent where our 40 days are just beginning...for Jesus they are coming to an end. This is the time in our spiritual practice, where we begin to determine just how we are going to “be” during this season and hopefully beyond. How we will relate to our God and relate to one another. Can

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we use the scriptures, the examples presented to us, to help us walk closer to God? Or will we continue to be tempted by serpents...

The serpent in our scripture and ones that exist all over creation today rarely shout from rooftops or are easily recognizable. They are commonly speaking in a hushed, controlled voice – subtly sneaking into our text books, twitter feeds and evening news commentary. You may even find a serpent in a church meeting or standing in a pulpit from time to time. Temptations come in all shapes and sizes, just as they did that day all those years ago in my playroom. Today, as adults, they usually can be called addiction to wealth, power, influence over others, vanity or an inordinate need for control , little lies or big ones, small sins like a racist joke, a questionable business practice, a criticism or a spouse or partner or child when he or she is not around. Temptation wins when we get so caught up in the trappings fo life that we lose sight of life itself. Temptation comes to us in moments when we look at others and feel insecure about not having enough.

I'm going to read a passage #11 from our devotional, Rise...it starts with scripture from Mark 5:1-5. Listen....(inserted copy)

You see, we are all imperfect and we are all in our wilderness. While Jesus was at the end of his journey in our scripture, his confrontation with the devil, ours never ends truly. But when we reach out to community, we find strength. When we heal the divisions that surround us, we heal as well and become

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stronger and more able to recognize the whispers. More able to support leaders who speak God's truth instead of being romanticized with ideals that go against what will truly make us happy, both individually and as a people.

Last summer I purchased this ring, it's a serpent and I wear it to remind myself how clever, how crafty evil can truly be.

Amen