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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, February 26, 2023

1 Lent, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

[Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7](#)

[Psalm 32](#)

[Romans 5:12-19](#)

[Matthew 4:1-11](#)

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James James
Morrison Morrison
Weatherby George Dupree
Took great
Care of his Mother,
Though he was only three.
James James Said to his Mother,
“Mother,” he said, said he;
“You must never go down
to the end of the town,
if you don’t go down with me.”

James James
Morrison’s Mother
Put on a golden gown.
James James Morrison’s Mother
Drove to the end of the town.
James James Morrison’s Mother
Said to herself, said she:
“I can get right down
to the end of the town
and be back in time for tea.”

King John
Put up a notice,
“LOST or STOLEN or STRAYED!
JAMES JAMES MORRISON’S MOTHER
SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN MISLAID.
LAST SEEN
WANDERING VAGUELY:
QUITE OF HER OWN ACCORD,
SHE TRIED TO GET DOWN
TO THE END OF THE TOWN -
FORTY SHILLINGS REWARD!”

James James
Morrison’s mother
Hasn’t been heard of since.
King John said he was sorry,
So did the Queen and Prince.
King John
(Somebody told me)
Said to a man he knew:
If people go down to the end of the town, well,
what can anyone do?”

James James
Morrison Morrison
(Commonly known as Jim)
Told his
Other relations
Not to go blaming him.
James James
Said to his Mother,
“Mother,” he said, said he:
“You must never go down to the end of the town
without consulting me.”

That’s from a poem called “Disobedience,” by A. A. Milne, who was famous for writing *Winnie the Pooh*. And it may ring true for anyone who, like me, is the parent of a three-year-old, or knows one well.

There's the frank, unashamed bossiness. The longing for a role reversal: to be the one in charge, to make the rules and set the boundaries for others; to be the grown-up who tells others what to do instead of always being told what to do.

Today on this first Sunday in Lent we hear scripture readings about obedience and disobedience, about the longing to be in charge, about immaturity and maturity. We heard the great foundational story of Adam and Eve in the garden, tempted by a wily serpent to go beyond the boundaries set for them, and the simultaneous widening of horizons and loss of innocence that comes with their decision to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. We are not supposed to read this story as a history or science textbook. It is not meant to compete with the Big Bang or evolutionary biology. This is a story about human nature, about each of us and all of us, and about our longing to exist without limits, to define our own reality; to be God; and our willingness to break relationship in order to try.

It can be hard to separate that genuinely sinful longing from the genuinely holy longing to be more than we are; to expand our horizons and to grow up into truly mature human beings, which is good for us. The story doesn't say so, but I like to imagine that God intended to keep Eve and Adam from that tree not forever but until they were ready for it, until the knowledge of good and evil would benefit them rather than do them harm. You may have your own ways of playing with this story; for a good scripture story is sturdy enough to turn this way and that and look at from all different angles. In any case, these newly created humans choose not the hard path of going back and telling God they want to eat from the tree and seeing what God says but the shortcut of breaking faith, of acting in secrecy, of telling lies, which is a good test for whether what we're doing is good for us or not: does it lead us to transparency or secrecy, courage or shame, honesty or lies?

Eve and Adam choose the lie, as we their spiritual descendants so often do throughout the centuries. But there are other choices. St. Paul contrasts the faithlessness of Adam and Eve with the faithfulness of Jesus. Where they failed, he succeeds. Instead of grasping at the idea of shrugging off human limits, of being God, he who already *is* God chooses instead to take on our humanity fully, to embrace our limits and our frailty. As Paul writes in another place, “He did not consider being equal with God something to grasp onto, but he made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and took our human form. And being found in human form, he humbled himself further and was obedient all the way to death, even the death of the cross.”

We see that obedience at work here at the beginning of his ministry, just after he has been baptized. Jesus is not in a garden but in a desert, but like Eve and Adam he is tempted, and unlike them he stands firm. Three times the devil invites him to throw off the limitations of being human. He invites him to shrug off the limitation of hunger, of being subject to the suffering of this physical body in this natural world. He invites him to shrug off the limitation of physical danger, to hurl himself from the temple and create a spectacle. And finally he invites him to what is in fact Jesus’ actual destiny: to be the ruler of the world, rightly acknowledged and acclaimed by all, but to do so as a shortcut, without following the path of service laid out for him, to do it by serving Satan and breaking faith with God. And Jesus withstands.

This is where it's tempting to say, "Go thou and do likewise." It's Lent, a time for spiritual exertions. So be like Jesus, not like Adam and Eve. Get out there and resist temptation. But the reality is: we can't, most of us, most of the time. "Get out there and be like Jesus" is not the gospel because it's not good news, because it leaves us stuck relying on our own efforts, which basically means trying to be our own God, which is the problem in the first place. The good news is not that Jesus wants you to try harder and if you manage to be just like him then you'll finally be lovable in God's eyes. The good news is that Jesus has done for you what you and I can't do on our own. It's his obedience we trust in, not ours. God accepts us not because we are so strong and faithful and well-behaved but because God made us and is crazy about us and because Jesus makes us new not out of our worthiness but out of his.

Yes, there is growth in maturity. There is such a thing as making spiritual progress, at getting stronger at telling the truth and showing compassion and loving our neighbors. But that's the fruits of being loved and saved by God, not the requirement for it.

So this Lent, don't work harder to make God love you. Lean on what Jesus has done for you already, which is everything that ever needs or could need to be done. Love him. Give thanks to him. Love him in return. And then see what fruits he can bring forth in your life.