

Kids: The Aunt's taboo toothbrush temptation

Rev'd Peter Balabanski

Lent 1 a. Gen 2 15-17 & 3 1-7, Ps 32, Rom 5 12-21, Mt 4 1-11

Today we've heard two very familiar stories from the scriptures – a pigeon pair – about people tempted to abandon their loyalty to God. The story from Genesis often gets described as the story of “The Fall” – or the story of “Original Sin”. It's about the first humans being tempted to ignore God's warning about forbidden knowledge, and then what happens when they give in to that temptation. So it's about humanity's loss of innocence; about our expulsion from paradise – becoming strangers to God, and about the origin of death. We might call it the story of becoming strangers.

A Canadian Theologian, William Danaher wrote that in this Genesis story, *human flourishing is compromised*. It's a tragedy. Trust is eroded, loyalty is abandoned – people who were faithful people, faithful friends, suddenly become strangers, not only to God, but to each other and even to their own selves as well. When we act on a choice like this, somehow we stop being the people we knew we were only moments earlier.

It's a terrible spot to get into. Betrayal always leads to destructive silence; a secret loneliness that alone we have no strength to overcome. As the Psalmist says, *whilst I held my tongue; my bones wasted away ... your hand was heavy on me day and night*. Yet we've heard today that there *is* a way back from it. Paul stressed it again and again today. No matter what lie has been told; no matter what a stranger we've become to those we love and who love us, and even to our true selves, the free gift of Jesus's integrity and grace offers us the way back.

The joy of this experience is beyond normal language to tell, but as ever, the Psalmist knows the words; *whoever puts their trust in the Lord, mercy embraces them on every side.*

The Gospel story of Jesus' temptation in the Judean wilderness is the pigeon pair to the story from Genesis – a mirror in which much is reversed. Where there was the lush Garden of Eden, now there's a harsh, dangerous desert. There, two people with all they needed; now Jesus alone and at the brink of survival. And the temptation to ignore God's words is more sophisticated; now it's presented as a temptation to hear God's words falsely; to imagine they're only about personal gain. The packaging is more sophisticated, but the basic temptation is the same; forget your loyalty; forget your integrity; forget your honesty and go for self-sufficiency, invulnerability and power and glory.

If we go down this path, can we see how it will lead us away from our own humanity? Everything precious to us is shared with our loved ones; it's received with grateful joy, or suffered in the embrace of compassion. Outside of relationship, none of it has meaning. Knowing this, it's clear how gross and destructive each of the temptations in the wilderness actually is. Each demands the abandonment of trust, of loyalty, the abandonment of being in relationship – in short, the abandonment of being truly human. And in the wilderness, Jesus withstands them all. We might call this the story of sticking with your friendships. (v/s becoming strangers)

But for now the wilderness is the image we need to stick with. The desert is lonely and dangerous. Yet it is an essential place for us.

It's the place we end up when we've succumbed to temptations which all derive from the temptations we've heard today – and they all lead to isolation. The emotions out in this wilderness are likely to move from bitter sadness through angry self-justification to overpowering self-pity – then back

again. We're tempted to give into those feelings – blame others for what we've done; choose to cut ties and go it alone – imagine how sorry *they'll* be. It's a place where we have to choose between becoming a monster, or going back and owning up to the fool we've been.

The Spirit led Jesus into that wilderness – and he went.

This is not the only time Jesus went into the place of our weakness; our vulnerability. It's the story of his life – his birth and his death. And we need to keep most firmly in view what those choices of his were for. If the Genesis story is one about becoming strangers to paradise, Jesus's desert story is about seeking us in the wilderness. As soon as he's been baptised and commissioned, he follows the Spirit's lead straight out to our wildernesses – our desert – opening our eyes, un-stopping our ears, calling us back a sense of who and where we are. The desert isn't something we can avoid or ignore. It's part of every human life. We discover it in Lent as a space God allows – that God creates – where we can receive God's grace without hindrance. It's our meeting place with God.

In the ABM Lenten desert reflections, Celia Kemp writes; *...there is no space that God opens up in our lives that God doesn't fill. The challenge is to leave the busy surfaces of our lives and enter the desert at our heart in the wild hope that a way may be prepared for us to see God. Amen.*