

Texts: Genesis 2:15-17, Matthew 4:1-11

In Genesis 2, our family history starts. Human identity is formed. The intended design of healthy relationship between human and Creator is initially cast, as defined by the Creator. "We can live here together, we can all live here and live well, if you farm and take care of the land. If you cultivate the fertile soil, from which you have your own roots, life will be good. Enjoy all the fruit of all the trees." This is all God's garden; God's doing; the supreme artist's masterwork. Given. Provided. With the purpose of sustaining life, in all its wondrous, multitudinous, dynamic beauty. God imbues the human (us) clearly, from the start, with the responsibility of self-management, self-control, self-discipline, knowing that dangers lurk and threats are inherent. Limits are needed, boundaries are to be heeded. Or else, life will be turned upside down, we'll take it on the chin, life's promise of a prosperous future will be severed and a premature end looms: "If you eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you will die." God equips the human family with all that is needed to thrive, including the ability to exercise boundaries and limits. Don't go there.

Our New Testament reading takes us to a different time and another place; not the garden, but the wilderness. Wilderness, in the Bible, developed into a metaphor for spiritual testing; the challenging, arduous work of determining what is best, and resisting the sneaky, seductive voices of sin. I believe we've all spent time in that stark wilderness. Limits, in the wilderness places, are to be heeded, boundaries respected; don't go there. The Creator has designed us, informed us, and provided us with all that is needed to thrive. Go here, not there.

I went to the gym the other day, to work out. Minding my own business, I stepped onto the elliptical to do cardio work, while others, strangers, mostly men, mostly younger than me, did their things in the same, large room. While using my earphones, I heard unusually loud noises from the others: the crash of dropped barbells, the rhythmic screeches of load-tested equipment, and the bravado of fitness room exclamations. I minded my own business. In the middle of my workout, I felt the floor beneath me drop for a moment and then vibrate after a huge weight was dropped somewhere behind me. I wasn't there to prove anything, or to attract anyone's attention, but others seemed to have that purpose. Finished with my cardio, I scanned the room to see if there was any other equipment I wished to use which had not already been claimed by the lifters and grunters and droppers. Seeing none, I decided to retire to another, quieter room, to finish my workout, by myself. These guys clearly owned the room; I let them keep it.

The devil acted as though he owned the place, the wilderness; he controlled everything, was in charge of everything there. Jesus entered, sent by the Spirit, for his forty days and forty nights' assignment as the newly baptized. He fasted for those forty days and forty nights, after which Matthew informs us that "he was starving". For food, for sure. Plus, since, back then, eating was a social occasion, as much, or more, about the

people you are with than the food you eat, we can surmise that Jesus was also starving for social interaction. Jesus faced temptation while physically and socially deprived; in a weakened and fragile state, for an extended period of time. Not at the top of his game. And who pays him a visit, there and then? You know who: the guy who thinks he owns the place. Loud and bold, grunts and bravado, all kinds of cards in his stack to play, crooked deals to offer, clever deceptions to spin! We've all spent some time in that wilderness, often when we're not our best selves. What do I do? What would Jesus do? We pray. We think it through as best we can. Recall our identity as baptized. Play out the possible consequences and their meaning, in our mind.

All alone, is Jesus. Physically depleted, is Jesus. At a critical time; not at his best. Jesus does not walk away. Jesus engages in conversation with the devil. Despite the circumstances, remembering he is baptized, claimed by God's covenant, and sent, by the Spirit. It is wilderness, all over; stark and lonely for testing and temptation. We learn, here, that the wilderness is about to be cultivated, farmed by the Savior, cared for by our Redeemer. The dust of temptation, danger, and death transform into fertile soil for life. The devil won't keep it.

For Jesus, the temptations are about prosperity (turning stones into bread), security (throw yourself off the temple because the angels will catch you), and power ("I'll give you all the kingdoms of the world if you bow down and worship me."). The devil, the one who acts like he owns the place, the one who makes all the noise and controls all the equipment, offered Jesus sure markers of success; what any human being would want: prosperity, security, and power. The devil still plays that game with us, trying to talk us out of our lives with shaky promises of prosperity, security, and power. We know otherwise.

Jesus cultivates the dry dust of temptation and enriches it with the Word. Jesus takes back control of the room, the wilderness, for all who follow; plants seeds of resistance within the dust of temptation. Those seeds are still there, in the temptations you face. Jesus, physically and socially deprived, holds his own against the devil. Neither short-sighted nor grabbing after what was best for him at the moment, he counters the devil with words from the Book of Deuteronomy. "People won't live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God." "Don't test the Lord your God." "You will worship the Lord your God." Wilderness becomes a garden. Weakness reveals strength. Covenant holds; love will not let me go. The devil is shown the door.

When we are depleted and worn out. If we are distracted and overwhelmed, restless and disturbed. Alone and fragile. Vulnerable or afraid. Challenged by that clever adversary, that one who wants us to think he's in control, we might as well give in. In this wilderness, Jesus stakes his claim: he owns this place. In life and in death, we belong to God.

Personal limits and boundaries do demand our careful attention; it remains in our hands to manage our own life choices – don't test the Lord your God. God centered, not self-centered, we will worship the Lord our God.

However depleted we may be, however weary we may become, this is **all** God's garden; God's doing; the supreme artist's masterwork. Given. Provided. With the purpose of sustaining life, in all its wondrous, multitudinous, dynamic, joy-filled beauty. God imbues us with the responsibility of self-management, self-control, self-discipline, knowing that dangers lurk and threats are inherent.

To the wilderness of hunger, God gives the bread of life and the cup of salvation. For isolation and separation, God invites everyone to the table, as the family of faith, brothers and sisters, all are forgiven in our Savior Jesus Christ. There is a table is set before us. We will not be hungry and we will not be alone, in life and in death. No other has the run of the room, no other rules the place. There is only one: we worship the Lord our God.