Lent 1—Year A
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7
Psalm 32
Romans 5:12-19
Matthew 4:1-11

So, we are five days into **Lent**. *Anybody already blown your **Lenten practice**? Anybody have yet to start a **practice** at all?*

Temptations abound. The **temptation** to give into **busyness**. The **temptation** to give into **distraction**.

The **temptation** to give into **apathy** or **lethargy**, or maybe this week in particular, if our attention was grabbed by the spread of the **Coronavirus** or the **stock market freefall**, the **temptation** to give into **full blown anxiety or fear**.

Or, if our **attention** was grabbed by the **political process** and all the **division** or plain **dysfunction**, the **temptation** to give into **cynicism** or **disengagement** or just plain **despair**.

And this doesn't even begin to address the **specific temptations** that are **perfectly shaped** to fit the **contours** of our **individual lives**. As the **Collect** says, **"Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of *each* of us…"** We are **assaulted** by **many temptations** and **every single one of us** has our share of **weaknesses**.

So, as we dive into the **layers of our soul** in this **Lenten** season, it is good for us, right *at the beginning*, to spend some time contemplating **temptation**, ***how it works*** and what is ***at the heart of it***, so that we might be better equipped to **spot it** and **know what to do with it**.

If we examine the **gospel**, we see some interesting things right off the bat. First of all, it's the ***Spirit*** **who leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil**. **Jesus** may have ***heard*** **God declare that he was God's beloved Son** and **one in whom God was well pleased**, but **God knows** that ***it is a journey*** to ***claim*** that **identity *in our core*** and ***know what that means*** in the **nitty gritty of our lives**. We've got to **go into the wilderness**, into a place **where all the distractions are stripped away**, so that **those deeper voices that whisper** and **fuel** so much of our **behavior** can **rise** and **be confronted**.

The **tempter** comes when **Jesus** is at his **emptiest**, and the **tempter** comes to **Jesus** with **three specific temptations**—to **turn stones to bread** (because **Jesus *is* famished after his 40 day fast**), to **jump off the pinnacle of the temple and trust the angels to catch him**, and to have **all the kingdoms of the world**, and their **splendor**, and even more insidious, their **worship given all to him**. And even trickier, the **first two temptations come with the preface, *"If you are the Son of God"***—this is a **challenge** to **Jesus** in his **core identity**; this is a direct challenge to his **status** as **God's beloved**. By the **third temptation**, the **tempter erases** all **"Son of God"** language, **erases any vestige of Jesus' humanity**, and **just makes Jesus full-on God**.

And **each** of these **three temptations** represents one of the centers of the **False Self**. To **command stones to turn into loaves of bread** speaks to our **hunger** to **dictate what will be *or* not be**, to **dictate outcomes**, our **hunger** to **exert power and control**; to **jump off the temple** and be **swooped up by angels** speaks to our **primal need** for **safety, security, and survival**; and to **receive the worship of all the kingdoms of the world** speaks to our **insatiable desire** for **esteem and affection**. Oh, the **faces** of the **False Self** come to us under a **thousand disguises**. We all **struggle** with our **desire for power and control**, we all **wrestle** with our **desire for safety, security, and survival**, we **know** well our **desire for esteem and affection**.

And here's the thing, it's ***not*** a **binary choice *between*** the **False Self** and the **True Self.** And it's ***not*** that the **False Self** is the **bad self** and the **True Self** is the **good self**—such **distinctions** are the **bread and butter** of the **False Self**.

So, what is the **True Self**? And here, I am grateful to **Richard Rohr** and **Thomas Merton** and **Cynthia Bourgeault** and others who have brought all this teaching about the **True Self** and **False Self** back into our **spiritual awareness**. The **True Self** is that place within us that is **connected to God** and **who has *never <u>not</u>* been connected to God**. This is ***not*** just an idea; this is a **fundamental reality true of every human being—God breathed life into our flesh**; in **Jesus**, **God took on our flesh** as **God's own**—we are **fundamentally**, **irrevocably connected to God**, period.

So, **our little "s" self, our small self, *rests*** in the **True Self**, but here's the thing, *that* **doesn't** do us a bit of **good *if we are not conscious of our connection*, *if we are not awake*** and ***alive*** to ***who we really are***. **Being anchored in the True Self *doesn't mean*** that the **False Self** won't still come knocking on our door.

That's precisely the point of **this morning's gospel**. ***The Spirit* sent Jesus into the wilderness** so that he could **gain some capacity** to **REMEMBER** his **True Self**, ***even as the False Self kept issuing those seductive invitations***. To the **extent** that **we** are **grounded *in***, **resting *in***, **aware *of***, and **awake *to*** our **True Self** as those **irrevocably loved *by*** and **connected *to* God**, that's the **extent** to which we will be able to **smile at those invitations** and say ***"no thank you."* BUT when we are *not* anchored** in our **True Self**, in that **connection to God**, well, **we will think** that **power and control**, **safety, security, and survival**, and **esteem and affection** are **all we've got**, and we will spend all of **our energy jockeying for power, position, and prestige**; and as **Richard Rohr** has so rightly pointed out, the **person consumed by the False Self will do evil and call it good**.

How do the **faces** of the **False Self present themselves** to **you** in **your life**? Where are you in a **battle for power or control**? Where are you **consumed with anxiety** with regard to your **needs for safety, security, and survival**? How does your **need** for **esteem and affection shape**, or **misshape**, your **relationships**? ***Are you aware of your irrevocable connection to God in your core?***

When we are *not* awake to our True Self, **we think that we**, and **our False Self**, are **all that we've got**, and that **gets us in a hot mess**. ***Exhibit A, Genesis 3.***

And before we tackle the meat of this here, I just want to note a few things on behalf of the **woman**. **When God gave a-dam**, the **human being**, the **command**, **"You may eat freely of *every* tree of**

the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die," the **woman *had not yet even been created***. Just saying…

After the woman is created, we next pick up the story in **Genesis 3**, and that **crafty serpent** has **twisted** this **command filled with abundance *into*** a **command filled with scarcity**, **"Did God say, 'You shall not eat from *any* tree in the garden'?"** Oh, that's *tricky*; that's *not* what God said—big difference between ***every but one*** and ***any***. When **abundance flips to scarcity**, and **fear creeps in**, we can all be thrown off our game. **The woman responds, "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.'"** All of the sudden, the **command not to eat of the one tree *expands*** to ***not even touching* that fruit**.

What if God did want them to *touch* that fruit, ***but maybe not eat it***? **What if God was aware** that **you have to spend some time in *proximity* to the knowledge of good and evil before you *ingest* it wholly**? Just a thought.

The **serpent** has been dancing around the edges, but now **he speaks to the heart of the False Self**—**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. *Oh woman, this isn't going to kill you; your eyes will be opened, and you WILL BE LIKE GOD. You won't NEED God, you'll BE GOD yourself."*** Boom—game, set, match.

So, **when the woman saw that the tree was *good for food*, and that it was a *delight to the eyes*, and that the tree was to be *desired to make one wise*, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.** And there is *nothing wrong* with things being **good for food**, and **beautiful**, and **able to increase our wisdom**, ***but those are all disguises*** for the **False Self** who wants **TO BE GOD**, ***instead*** of understanding that **we are irrevocably CONNECTED to God**.

And here's the clue that we are dealing with **False Self/True Self** stuff here. In the **verse right before the serpent enters the story**, the text tells us that **"the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed."** ***As soon as they eat of this fruit***, we're told, **"Then the eyes of both were opened, and they *knew* that they were *naked*; and they *sewed* fig leaves together and *made* loincloths *for themselves*."**

Next, **God comes walking in the garden**, and t**he man and woman hid themselves from God's presence**. **God calls out them**, *just as **God** does to all of us*, **"Where are you?"** and the implicit and pained, **"Why are you hiding from me?"**

And the man said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was *afraid*, because I was *naked*, and I *hid* myself."

Naked, exposed, hiding, separation, disconnection, *heavy*—and so **SHAME enters our human story**. As soon as ***WE* reach to be God**, ***WE* think *WE'RE* all we've got**, and **we forget** what it is to **rest in our connection to God *knowing*** that **we are quite enough as human creatures beloved by our Creator**.

You can just hear **God** go, **"Oh man, who told you that you were *naked*? Have you eaten from that tree?"**

And **SHAME** starts **ricocheting** round and round. **The man *blames* the woman**, the **woman *blames* the serpent**, and the ***blame* game** is set in motion for eternity.

One final thought here. We think of **God's expulsion from the garden** as **a punishment**, but what if it was ***actually* a supreme kindness**. Now that the **humans have eaten of fruit of the knowledge of good and evil**, a ***knowledge they weren't prepared to take in all at once***; now that the **humans have that experience of SHAME and disconnection**, **God doesn't want to take the risk** that **they** will **get ahold of that fruit that would allow them to live forever**. ***God doesn't want us to live in SHAME and disconnection forever.***

God sends us on our way, **out of the garden**, with the **gift of time** to **LEARN *how*** to **integrate this knowledge of good and evil** and to **LEARN *how*** to **stay anchored in our connection to God** in the **face of all the temptations** that **invite** us to **believe** that **WE possess the full knowledge of good and evil**, that **WE are God. God** sends us on our way to **LEARN *how*** to **REMEMBER WHO WE ARE in the face all the temptations** that **invite** us to **forget** our **True Self**.

And so, we end where we began, **we are** indeed **assaulted by many temptations**, and **God knows the weaknesses of each of us**. It will ***not*** be **power** that **saves** us, ***nor* control**; it ***won't*** be **safety** or **security** or **survival** that **rescues** us; it ***won't*** be **esteem** or **affection** that **makes us whole**; it ***won't*** be **the knowledge of good and evil**, and it certainly ***won't*** be **putting ourselves in the place of God**.

What **WILL SAVE** us is **REMEMBERING that God has already RE-MEMBERED us; God has already knit OUR SELF** into the **TRUE SELF. REMEMBER, you're irrevocably connected** to **God; you always have been,** and **you always will be**.

We've **swapped out** our **fig leaves and loincloths** and **our SHAME**; our **True Self** is **clothed** with the very **Presence of God**. **Grounded** in **this deep unshakable knowing**, **anchored** in **this truth**—the **devil**, the **tempter**, the **serpent**, the **False Self**—they can say what they will, but their **whispered seductive invitations** are ***no match*** for the **Self** that knows its **beloved**. Amen.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Boone, NC
March 1, 2020