

Mark 8:31-38

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Sermon: Lead Us Not Into Temptation

Last Sunday I went up to the church school for a theological consultation. The students had read the story of Adam and Eve and Stephen Mayer, who turned 8 at the end of December, wanted to know why God would create the serpent and set in motion the rest of the story - temptation, disobedience, and fall from grace in the garden of Eden.

Stephen may be 8, but that is not a childish question. It touches on many issues that have perplexed generations not the least of which are human freedom and frailty, the incompatibility of an all powerful God with the existence of evil, the persistence of evil as an independent reality with a life of it's own that seems ever ready to exploit our weaknesses and ruin our lives, and questions of why we are put to the test by so many varying conditions and circumstances in almost every phase of our lives and history.

As groundwork for my response, I told the Church School children that there are different kinds of stories in the Bible - some are eye witness accounts of events, some are designed to teach a lesson about how to live, and some are seeking explanations of why things are the way they are. Now Adam and Eve is that last kind of story.

The fancy word is an etiological story - a story of origins. People look at the world around them and see that people know the difference between right and wrong, but often they are tempted to do something they know is wrong - something that might hurt someone else or even hurt themselves. They wrestle with the questions and they don't always make the righteous decision. We see this every day, we know it's real - Why is life like this? When did this start and how did this happen?

In the style of his day, St. Augustine taught that the story of Adam and Eve was an allegory - that Adam represented Wisdom and Eve represented Knowledge and the serpent represented sensuality - that when sensuality

takes charge it subverts wisdom and confounds knowledge and we are on that path to perdition.

I didn't mention Augustine or allegory to the church school children. I told them that when I was 8 years old I was a big fan of Daffy Duck. Quite often when Daffy was confronted with a moral dilemma his struggle was depicted by two little totem Daffys that would appear over each shoulder - the good Daffy in white with a halo, wings and a harp, and the bad Daffy in red with horns, a tail, and pitchfork. And Daffy would hear both their arguments and then be faced with a decision. Neither the good nor the evil path was ever forced upon Daffy - he was free to make a choice.

This was the focus I emphasized for the children - that God gives us freedom and with freedom comes choices just like Adam and Eve faced in the garden.

That might not have been a totally satisfactory answer. Part of the confusion we feel in the light of our freedom to choose good or evil stems from our sense that God is all powerful and if God is all powerful why is God's creation not all good. Like the Tony Bennett song: If I ruled the world every day would be the first day of spring, every heart would have a new song to sing, and we'd sing of the joy every morning would bring.

But maybe God is all powerful in a different way than that. Maybe we don't understand God's power. We think of power as the ability to control things and ultimate power, as we believe God has, as the ability of control everything. But the Bible tells a different story - the Bible says that God's power is expressed most fully by relinquishing control and setting us free.

We can see this conflict of perceptions of power play out in the story from the Gospel this morning - the setting for the scene is that the disciples have just figured out who Jesus really is and Peter has made this confession: You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

What did that mean to Peter? It meant that Jesus would soon be in control, he'd summon all the armies of the heavenly host and push those Romans and collaborating Jews out of power and take over - he'd be running the show.

But what does Jesus say to the disciples; he says: the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

This is too much for Peter, who takes Jesus aside to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, Jesus rebukes Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Do you remember what the snake said to Eve in the garden? The snake told her that God was trying to hold something back from her - that the warning not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was

God's way of keeping them down, but if they ate from it they lift themselves up, they would become like God.

Jesus came to whisper a far different message in our ear - Jesus said that God holds nothing back, and that rather than striving to become like God we should simply be fully human and use our freedom to love one another. This is the path to being lifted up, the is the way through death to resurrection.

Jesus gives us a new commandment: Love one another as I have loved you. He gives us that choice, that free choice. For in truth, love can only grow out of the ground of freedom. And are not temptation, trials, and suffering all the price of freedom - and isn't that a small price to pay for the possibility of love?

Jesus thought it was a price worth paying, and he paid it in full for our sakes. We may not know why God created the serpent in the garden or why life tests us as it does any more than we many know why Christ carried the cross up a hill called Golgotha or why he said , "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

What we do know is that when we hear those words we have a choice - a choice to follow or to turn away; a choice for faith or for fear - a choice to listen to the serpent or to the Son of God. Lord, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.