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Given at St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater, CT

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 ; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11
“Oh posh...You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes
will be opened, and you will be like God”
(Gen 3.4) †

This story from Genesis is so appropriate for us today, because it's a Biblical account full of ambiguity, In this story, God seems clear, saying 'You may freely eat 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.' Then this serpent comes along with a different view: 'You will not die... you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' So which one is right? Who's telling the truth, God or the serpent? In this present era of 'fake news,' I can't help but feel that there's something missing here. More is happening than is stated. After all, both Adam and Eve ate the fruit, and they didn't 'die.' So, was God lying? Was this all just 'fake news'? Or is knowing about good and evil not all its cracked up to be?

'Seeing' and 'knowing' are words used through out this story in Genesis. Even before biting into the fruit, we are told Eve 'saw the tree was good for food and a delight to the eyes' (3.6). The point of the story is not whether God or the serpent was right, perhaps they both were, in a convoluted way; the point is about knowing and being known. Adam and Eve may not have physically died and ceased to exist, but their existence and relationship with God was dramatically changed by their choices and action. As far as God was concerned, they had died. They were no longer the innocent, loving creatures that were initially created. You can almost envision God saying, "You are dead to me! Go away."

The Hebrew text cleverly compares these humans to the serpent, using a play on words, using the word עָרוּם ('*arum*) which means 'crafty or shrewd' for the serpent, and עֲרֻמִּים ('*arummim*) which means 'naked or uncovered' for Adam and Eve. The underlying thought being that whether we think we are crafty or shrewd, we're always uncovered before God. No matter how much 'fake news' we distribute out there, no matter how slick we think we are, God knows the truth! God knows our vulnerability, and that we are but mortal.

Every year on the first Sunday of Lent, we hear a version of Jesus' temptation by the devil in the wilderness, by *Diabolos*— the devil, the tempter, the adversary, the counter-spirit. This year we hear from the Gospel of Matthew. The 40 days in the wilderness is an allegory for hardship and struggle— recalling the 40 days Noah and his family spent drifting in the ark with uncertainty, the 40 days Moses spent fasting in the desert before meeting God, the 40 years the Israelites wandered the wilderness in search of the promised land, and now today, for we Christians these 40 days of Lent are our wilderness time, a time to contemplate and recall Jesus'

mission on this earth and journey toward the Cross. The story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness should be heard with the story of Adam and Eve in mind, as St Paul's letter to the Romans tells us, so that we realize that we are being tempted by the same crafty creature that led those two astray... We are tempted by crafty ideals about wealth and success, and power. We are equally vulnerable to accepting 'alternative facts' that lead to temptation. How often we fall for the trick and believe the lie. I know I do! Often I get so wrapped up and interested in what I can do for myself, more interested in self-knowledge and my own power, that I don't see what God can do with and for me. Its human nature, just turn on the TV and watch the news... everybody's trying to get their own way, everybody's distorting the truth (on both sides). Can you see and hear the serpent? Do you see that crafty thing emphasizing talent, power, celebrity, and the need to be important?

The Gospel story shows us a different way. Jesus takes a different path. Jesus refuses to be who the devil wants him to be, and in doing so, shows us that the great error Adam and Eve made was not trusting God. Jesus refuses to turn stones into bread to satisfy his own hunger and yet later, at the will of God, he will feed thousands on a desolate field with only a few loaves and fish (Mt 14.17, 15.33). Jesus refuses to take advantage of his relationship with God by hurling himself from the Temple parapet, and yet will eventually follow God's will and end his earthly ministry by enduring pain, and being hung high on the cross (Mt 27.3, 27.46). Jesus refuses the chance for political leadership, power and rule in the world, and yet will offer the Kingdom of God to all who follow him.

Temptation in the wilderness... Perhaps it comes down to a simple choice. To making a choice not to follow our will, but God's will. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus' wilderness experience with the devil is replayed in so many of his encounters: with those who are sick, hungry, in need, with those who have powerful connections, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, with those who pay too much attention to the world's assessment of success and what is important, like his disciples (Mt18.5). And Jesus, over and over, makes that choice to trust God. Jesus refuses to allow the devil to change him! In the same way, Jesus refuses to allow any of us to do that either. He refuses to be who we want him to be and do what we want him to do. He won't turn our stones into bread, he won't rescue us from financial hardships miraculously, and he won't prevent us from doing foolish things.

This is disappointing, because it's in our nature to want easy answers, we want power and might to overcome the what's wrong in this world, we want our side to win. And just like those early first Century Christians Paul spoke to, we want a powerful Messiah to come in and change things; to fix it all and make it better. Despite the 'alternative facts' or 'fake news' we may want to hear, Jesus did not come into our world with power and control, he came with humility and vulnerability, trusting in God's ways. He offered love, was willing to suffer and let go of self, and in doing so gained our ultimate salvation.

'Oh please, you will not die... you will be just like God...' Lent is a time for our own struggles in the wilderness. It's a time for us to recognize that the serpent's offer,

though tempting, is 'fake news.' It's a time to realize when and how we have failed to trust God and be ourselves. May we come to follow Jesus' example on his journey toward Calvary: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him' (Mt 4.10; Deut 6.13). †