

Back to the Basics

A sermon by Joe Hoffman

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1st Sunday in Lent

The season of Lent has always been an important time for me. It is a time to ponder again who I am and what life is about. What are my priorities? What are my commitments? What is important? It is clearing the clutter and going back to the basics.

Now, I know that for many of us, Lent is a hard season. Michael Hester spoke of this in his Ash Wednesday sermon. It is hard because we are walking through a landscape of struggle and confusion. For many of us the symbols of this season – such as the cross – are unbearable – for we have been beaten up with the messages of our self worthlessness and God’s manipulations. I know some people who will not even go to church during Lent because the texts and the former experiences they have had are too much to face again. Why should we put ourselves back in a situation to be beaten up again?

So I want to name that. I want to name that whatever I say from the pulpit is likely to offend someone. But I also want to promise this. I will walk with you through this landscape of Lent as carefully and lovingly as I can. I promise not to use these texts to beat you up or make you feel guilty. I also promise to honor the texts, not to shy away from them, but to place the challenge before us and together to trust that we can find our way.

In that spirit, I want to invite you to clear a little space in your mind. To set aside what you know about this story of temptation and to open up just a little room to think about it again. And to deepen the trust between us, I want to tell you what I am not going to say. I am not going to talk about original sin or the fall. I am not going to talk about man having power over woman. I am not going to talk about God judging and condemning. I am not going to talk about sex. And I am not going to talk about evil.

Instead, I want to call us back to the basics of faith. And I want to remind you that going back to the basics might be going back to a place we have never been before – much in the spirit of Marcus Borg who writes of Reading the Bible again for the first time. To go back to the basics is not to go back to a childish place, but to once again ground ourselves in the depth of our Spirit and the Spirit of God. It is to go home.

This foundational story is deep with meaning and possibility. It is a shame to talk about it at all – it would be good to just let the story get into our heads and our hearts and to carry it with us for all that it is. But we carry so much baggage – I want to just guide our thinking a little. I also believe in the power of art and image, and I hope the art image on the front of your bulletin will be something you will ponder and wonder about. Mandy Kjellstrom is our artist for Lent – and she plans to draw a different bulletin cover each week. So take that time to let your imagination roam as you study the art image. What do you see? What do you feel? What story does it tell?

Lent always begins with the story of temptation – either the story of Jesus temptation in the wilderness or this temptation story from Genesis. It is a good place to begin. For all of us are tempted to be someone we are not. We all play with the idea of who we want to be when we grow up. I celebrated a birthday this week and again I have asked myself – who do I want to be when I grow up? Am I living the life I want to live? Am I living the life I am called to live? To go back to the basics is to ask this question again. It is a time to consider how we are investing ourselves in the lives we live and to ask God to once again open us to who we are and how we connect with all that is around us.

Our journey in life – and through Lent – is not private or disconnected from community or Earth. We live in a context – and this story reminds us of that context. We are placed in a garden. It is a place that will sustain us if we care for it. There is a mutuality to our relationship. God has designed it to be this way.

We are given a task. The garden cannot exist on its own. The garden requires work, intention and care. We are the keeper of the garden. God is the Giver, and we are the Keepers. All of us are Keepers. We share the task mutually. No one has power over another. If one of us abuses the responsibility, we are all in danger.

We are permitted and invited and playfully, joyfully encouraged to enjoy the garden. Eat freely. Pleasure in the gifts of this place. Eat of the tree of life that is in the garden. This is all for you.

So we have a task, and we are invited and permitted to eat freely of the garden and to enjoy all that is provided. What a wonderful context for us to find ourselves in!

But there is one other thing – a prohibition. This prohibition is what gets all the attention these days. There is another tree in the garden. This tree offers the knowledge of good and evil. This tree is dangerous – because it can disrupt the peace of the garden. This tree can bring death.

Why would God place such a temptation in the garden? Why would God seduce us with what we cannot have? It is easy to become negative towards God at this point. If God loves us, why does God make it so easy for us to be tempted? Why doesn't God protect us, hide us away, keep us safe not only from harm but from the possibility of harm?

The original audience would not have thought too much in terms of ethics, or in terms of good and evil. This text is a story about our relationship with God, self, and Earth (and all the living things of Earth). You see, the temptation is to be more than we are. The temptation is to say "I want to be God." I want to have the wisdom of God. I want to know all that God knows. I want it all.

In the garden God gives us a task, permission to enjoy the garden, and one prohibition. That prohibition is that we cannot be God. God will be our partner. God will be our friend and our guide. But God will be God, and we can never know the full mystery of God.

The serpent challenges this notion. The serpent says we can have it all, we can know it all. The temptation is to place knowledge above trust. To place power above relationship. To place control above love and mutuality.

The prohibition is not to punish. It is to set a boundary that allows us the fullest life possible. But the serpent turns the boundary into a threat. A terror. God does not threaten us with death - the serpent does.

The serpent and God play minor roles in the story. But God's role is always strong: God breathed, God formed, God made, God planted. In contrast, the role of the serpent is only talking. The serpent has no transforming power. God alone has the power to transform and set free. The attempt by the two humans to be free without any restrictions causes them to become anxious and afraid. They have stepped beyond the boundaries that God has created – and now they are in danger. They have forfeited the gift and now are living in a false sense of reality.

Isn't it rather amazing that in this story, given all the good gifts that human beings are given, they choose to dwell on the one thing they are not given. They have the chorus of the birds, they have the laughter of the water as it plays across the rocks in the stream, they have the warmth of the sun, they have the delight of the food, they have the joy of companionship. But they set their sights on what they are not given – and they feel cheated. They choose to listen to one who wants to confuse them, who wants to make them feel inferior and insufficient instead of trusting the One who has given the Gift to begin with. The serpent is like those who tell us in advertisements that we will be happy if only we have this or that. Those who sell materialism want us to believe we can have it all. But there are boundaries.

The story sets forth the boundary that then makes life possible for all Earth and the creatures of Earth. It is set in a relational context. God is Giver. Humans are the Keepers in mutual relationship to one another. The task is to care for Earth and one another, to enjoy the many gifts, and to remember that there is still a mystery deeper than our knowing. God is more than we can comprehend.

That is where we begin. That is what we try to get in our hearts and minds. We are part of the larger web of life. We are blessed. Each of us is important. And none of us are God. We don't have to carry that responsibility. We are just called to be who we are in relation to all that God has made! And that is good news. Amen.