

Covenant Word

Remembering Who We Are

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
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Pastor
Sunday
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One of the first movies we took David to see was Peter Pan. Like most showings of children's movies, the audience was noisy with responses as the story is presented larger than life on the big screen. David liked the lightheartedness of the lost boys. The dastardly deeds of the pirates were sinister in his four year old eyes. Having nothing stronger to say, the worst comment he could muster in response to their evil deeds was "War Eagle, you Pirates!"

"Don't do it, ...! Remember who you are!"

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting
to read and study these
thoughts more
carefully. Please know
that I do not take full
credit for anything that
may be contained
within, because I may
have read or heard
something at some point
during my pilgrimage
and do not remember
its source and thus,
cannot give the rightful
author his/her credit. I
pray that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.**

Sarah Shelton

Most of the children were taken with Tinker Bell. You will remember that this whimsical creature is the best friend of Peter Pan, but Tinker Bell is also jealous of the attention that Peter gives to Wendy. At a particularly weak moment, Tinker Bell gives in to her dark side and betrays Peter. She goes to the villainous Captain Hook and tells him where Peter's secret hideout is located. This so distressed a child near us that she stood in her chair and with all of her preschool might yelled out, "Don't do it, Tinker Bell! You are Peter's friend!"

Perhaps you have wanted to say something like that when someone you cared about was about to make such a poor decision that it would negate their character.

I know I felt that way when I read Nathaniel Hawthorne's story "Young Goodman Brown." Young Goodman encounters the Tempter in the forest just outside the Salem village that Young Goodman calls home. Their encounter begins innocently, as I imagine any rendezvous with temptation does. Young Goodman notes that the forest has surrounded him, and begins to feel apprehensive. It is gloomy and dreary. He is lonely and fearful. So when another traveler journeys the same path, his company is welcomed.

The fellow traveler offers encouragement, lends his walking stick, and then tells that he knows Young Goodman. "I helped your grandfather, the constable, when he lashed the Quaker woman so smartly through the streets of Salem; and it was I that brought your father a pitch-pine knot, kindled at my

own hearth, to set fire to an Indian village, in King Philip's war. They were my good friends both... and I would fain be friends with you for their sake."

The invitation for relationship given, Young Goodman consistently replies to the Tempter's overtures with such statements as: "We are people of prayer...and abide no such wickedness." or "I will return from whence I came, for I have scruples." or "Not another step will I go." He sounds a lot like us when we are wavering and offer weak refusal when in the company of temptation that we fear is more powerful than our convictions. If only Young Goodman Brown could have acted on his words, what a difference it would have made! If only I could interrupt the story and beg of him, "Don't do it, Young Goodman! Remember who you are!"

Instead, as he wavers, he sees the woman who taught him his catechism, he spies the deacon of his church, he hears the voice of his minister and he is joined by his wife whose name is, ironically, Faith. The Tempter points out: "Here are all whom ye have revered from youth. Ye deemed them

holier than
yourselves, and
shrank from
your own sin,

contrasting it with their lives of <supposed> righteousness and prayerful aspirations heavenward. Yet here are they all in my worshipping assembly... gatherers at this unhallowed altar." He then lists their sins as inexhaustible supplies of evil impulses and actions. But before we know whether Young Goodman Brown was able to escape the dark conversion that the Tempter sought, the scene quickly changes and Young Goodman Brown finds himself at home in Salem.

Now Hawthorne hints that this could possibly have been a dream of Young Goodman, but he is never clear. The end result, however, was not determined by whether it was dream or reality. The experience so affected Young Goodman that he could never listen to the words of a sermon or the music of the church without unutterable misery consuming him. He knew he had seen the tempter's face. He had heard the tempter's words, and he was keenly aware of the secret lives of those with whom he was in community. He had encountered the Tempter with such profundity that upon his death, no hopeful verse could be put upon his tombstone. Hawthorne ends by saying that the dying hour of Young Goodman Brown was only gloom.

Now the issue we are dancing around this morning with all this talk of good and evil, temptation and darkness, is the theological concept of sin. Moderates do not care much for the word "sin" and so we often soften it by using words like "choice" or "decision" or "temptation." Perhaps we don't discuss it because we have felt unjustly labeled as sinners, or maybe moral judgments were too highly heaped upon our heads or perchance our own sense



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of shame and guilt is too difficult to face. Most of the time sin and temptation are only considered to be actions and so we talk about issues, making them the sin. Baptist have a long laundry list where this is concerned: gambling, smoking, drinking, cussing and sexual misconduct to name only a few.

Expecting to find more of the same in today's scripture, I was surprised to discover that neither in the Garden nor the Wilderness is the issue of sin about a particular activity. No, what I found was deeper than that. Sin, in the Garden and in the Wilderness, is about denying who we are as beloved children of God. It is when we forget our identity that we are likely to make a poor decision, therefore sin is our loss of self.

Out of utter graciousness, God creates the Garden of Eden and places man and woman within. God even invites them to join in the creative process by tending the garden and by being fruitful. Then that slippery serpent slides ever so slyly onto the scene. He uses just enough of God's words to misrepresent the truth. Rather than celebrating life as the undeserved gift that it is, the tempter opens the eyes of Eve and Adam to the possibility that there is opportunity outside of God's realm and purposes. Unable to trust their own well-being to the One who created them, they take charge of their own lives.

I imagine Eve under the tree, with the snake coiled along the limb just above her head. Adam is nearby. As she reaches for the fruit, I long for Adam to holler out at her: "Stop! Don't do it! Remember who you are!" Instead, he joins her and immediately, their own words give their indictment: (3:10-13) "I heard; I was afraid; I was naked; I hid; I ate; I ate also." No longer are they preoccupied with God and the divine vocation with which they were entrusted. They are preoccupied with "I."

It is what our acquisitive society wants us to believe as well. Through various forms of the serpent, we are seduced into believing that there are securities apart from the reality of God's provisions. And so consumerism drives our lives by appealing to our anxieties: "This car will make you successful." "This brand of clothing will make you hip." "Live in this area of town if you want to be popular." "This hair product will give you the look that brings acceptance." "This beer will attract the girls." "Smoke these cigarettes. They will make you sleek and sexy." "This pill will take your worries away."

Rather than walking with God in the garden in the cool of the day, we realize our exposure and run from our Creator. Like Adam and Eve, we hide in fear of who we have become. If only we had listened as we said to ourselves, and to others who said to us, "Don't do it!" we would still have a clear understanding of who we are as God's precious creation is enough on its own.

It is, of course, what distinguishes Jesus' response to temptation.

For forty days and forty nights Jesus fasted. It left him utterly depleted. (Anna Carter Florence <denoted as **A.C.F. from this point forward**>, "Preaching the Lesson," Lectionary

Homiletics, Feb 10, 2008) He is beyond hunger. The scripture says that he is "famished." All he has left is scripture, the Word of God, that he knows by heart and that he heard spoken as promise at his baptism: "You are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." All that Jesus has is who he is, God's beloved, no matter what.

The devil picks away at Jesus' Sonship. The three temptations—to turn stones into bread, to throw himself down from the top of the temple and to worship the Tempter—are

not enticements to DO bad things. He is not tempting Jesus to "misbehave." He is not tempting Jesus to steal a wallet or sneak a peek at the center of a magazine, or cheat on his taxes or pick a fight with his neighbor. It is deeper than that. The devil is tempting Jesus to ignore who He is. He is being tempted to be somebody else. He is being tempted to live some life other than that of the beloved Son of God. (Thomas Long, "Facing Up to Temptation," Whispering the Lyrics: Sermons for Lent and Easter)

Being in such a vulnerable state, the Tempter takes advantage of the timing and whispers in the ear of Jesus: *If you are the Son of God, turn this stone into bread. If you are so beloved then prove it. Do something. Throw yourself down. Show us a miracle. Use your power. If you ARE God's beloved, then do something, because I won't believe who you are until you prove it to me.* (A.C.F.)

How many times have we heard those words? *If you are such a smarty then prove it...make all A's whatever the cost. If you are such a cool guy then prove it to us: how much beer can you hold? If you are the All-American girl, then get the body to match...starve yourself and throw up your meals. If you are a good mother, then don't have any needs apart from your family. If you are a real man, then hide what you feel. If you are a good child, then sacrifice your joy and health in order to take care of your aging parent. Go on. If you really are who you say you are, then prove it.* (A.C.F.)

These Lenten scriptures move us from the state of being filled to being famished quickly. In only two verses we are taken from the Jordan, baptized and blessed, to the middle of nowhere, empty and tempted. We move from "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased!" to "IF you are the Son of God, command these stones to be loaves of bread." The distance

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between “you are” and “if you are” is a wilderness in and of itself. The vulnerability it presents has us all wanting to stand up and remind one another “Don’t do it. Remember who you are.” (A.C.F.)

For when we are in the wilderness, we are tempted to forget the unconditional love of which we were so convinced at our baptism.

When famished, we are tempted to let go of all that we know by heart like: “Seek first the kingdom of God, pray without ceasing, repay no one evil for evil, bear one another’s burdens, be kind to one another, be tenderhearted, forgive one another, love your enemies, be merciful.”

When confronted by the Tempter, we are more likely to forget “You are my beloved,” and only hear “IF you are beloved, then prove it. Earn it. Show that you deserve it.” (A.C.F.)

So when temptation comes and we are faced with compromising our identity as God’s own, hear my voice as it says to you: “Remember, please, for God’s sake and for yours, remember who you are!”

While Jesus knew who He was and did not compromise his identity, it seems to me that this is the sin that haunts believers. It is beneath the surface of any decision or action. Somehow we have allowed the Tempter to convince us that God’s love is conditional: that it has a price instead of being a free gift without any strings attached; that it is something we have to prove, not something that we are as creations of the Living, Loving God. And the agony of it is that once we accept God’s love as conditional, we are stuck in the wilderness. We have to live with the deal we have struck, for we have traded the promise that we are beloved for the ability to judge. Or put another way, we give up the complete unconditional acceptance of ourselves and others for the power of deciding who is beloved and who is not. (A.C.F.)

It eventually all comes back to this story. When we are famished and empty and afraid, the great temptation is that we must prove—to others and ourselves—what we already know to be true: “You are my beloved child. I am so pleased with you.”

Growing up in the Jackson household, it was not unusual at our family dinner table to be asked about our plans for an evening. Being the youngest of four and having observed “the drill” on many occasions, I tried to anticipate our Father’s litany of questions before they presented themselves. *Where was I going and what time would I be home* was usually how it began. These were followed with *Who are you going with? What does their father do? What church do they attend?* Then there were these questions *Do you have a dime in your shoe so you can call me if you need me?* And last was *Do you have a list of 7 things to talk about?*

My mother’s litany was much simpler but carried a larger whollop. She would hear my plans, look me dead in the eye and say, “Remember, you are a Jackson!”

I have often wondered exactly what she meant by that statement. I’m sure it was some sort of reminder that my behavior would somehow reflect on the family name and that any misbehavior

could bring shame and dishonor. But maybe she said it to bring to my awareness that I had a certain identity of my own. Maybe it was not so much about my behavior, i.e., what I might do, as much as this was a reminder about who I was and that nothing should deter me from being who I really was down in the deepest parts of my being. Maybe it was her way of saying: “You are my child, my beloved. I am so pleased with you. Please do not forget who you are.”

As we enter these 40 days of Lent...40 days of fasting, reflection and prayer...beware of the Tempter in your wilderness. Let me encourage you to imagine how different Lent can be, yea how different our lives can be, if we would make no other promise save that we will remember Whose we are...children of God...

created and saved by the gracious God who loves us. There is nothing to earn, nothing for which to bargain...just the acceptance of who we have been created to be. So when temptation comes and we are faced with compromising our identity

as God’s own, hear my voice as it says to you: “Remember, please, for God’s sake and for yours, remember who you are!”

Go down

We recently had a service of ordination for five new deacons. Sara Hoover could not be present that day because she was in San Francisco participating in the ministries of Glide Memorial Methodist Church. Sara found in her service to the hungry, homeless and often hopeless, that her efforts made a difference in their ability to accept their place of belonging as beloved children of God. She comes home to us with the commitment to serve in similar ways as a deacon of this church. Sara, come and kneel as we offer our blessings on you as you commit to serve and remind us whose we are.