

**‘Desire, Temptation, and God-blessed Relationships’**  
**Fourth in a series of Four on ‘Creation and Human Sexuality’**  
**Sunday, 17 February, 2013**  
**Lent 1C**  
**Genesis 3:6-19**  
**Luke 4:1-13**

Every year, the Church’s Revised Common Lectionary offers up one of the three accounts of Jesus’ wilderness trial and temptations as the Gospel lesson for the first Sunday in Lent. In Year A, we’re also assigned a reading from the third chapter of Genesis—the temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden—which we will hear this morning, even though we’re actually in Year C of the three-year cycle. But the lectionary is a tool, not a straightjacket for our learning as a Christian community; and because we’re completing our four-week series on Creation and Human Sexuality this Sunday, we’re using what’s appropriate and doing things a bit out of order. (Maybe we’ll use this year’s Old Testament lesson next year to redress the balance.)

In our fourth and final sermon in this series, we’re going to consider ‘Desire, Temptation, and God-blessed Relationships.’”

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***Prayer: May my words and our collective thoughts be acceptable to You, Creator and Lover of all. Amen.***

Temptation. Allure. Seduction. So much of what we encounter day-in and day-out is rooted in this, isn’t it—or at least, seems to participate in it? From the moment we wake up, to the moment our head hits the pillow again after a full day, we will have been bombarded with opportunities to get drawn in by something that may or may not be good for us, to give in to temptation; attempts on our person by advertisements, images, ideas, and sometimes by real people we encounter in the flesh, to seduce us with promises that can never fully deliver.

Why is it that sex appeal, or the appeal to sexuality, seems to work such a treat for selling everything from hand soap to automobiles and everything in between?

In part, it’s because it draws on the very human and daily experience of *desire*—to that very common longing for a sense of completeness, of ultimate unity and relatedness. Rob Bell, the famous evangelical mega-church pastor and author of the controversial heaven/hell book that created quite a stir in the U.S. a couple years ago entitled *Love Wins*, wrote another book called *Sex God*. According to Bell, “Scholars believe that the word sex is related to the Latin word *secare*, which means ‘to sever, to amputate, or to disconnect from the whole.’ This is where we get words like sect, section, dissect, etc.”

He continues, “Our sexuality, then, has two dimensions: First, our sexuality is our awareness of how profoundly we’re severed and cut off and disconnected. Secondly, our sexuality is all of the ways we go about trying to reconnect.”<sup>1</sup> He adds: “For many, sexuality is simply what happens

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Bell, *Sex God*, p. 27

between two people involving physical pleasure. But that's only a small percentage of what sexuality is. Our sexuality is all of the ways we strive to reconnect with our world, with each other, and with God."<sup>2</sup>

The idea that our sexuality is ultimately a quest for our completion, or for a sense of unity (or re-unification) is as old as our creation myths, and as familiar as the experience of falling in love. Our modern western phenomenon of searching for, wondering whether, and occasionally having the blessed experience of knowing that we've found "The One" builds on this very notion. In today's society, we take for granted there must be some sort of erotic component to a couple's partnership—if there is no 'spark' or sexual chemistry, as it's often called, then we question whether the relationship itself will last.

Today, *eros*—and use of the term 'erotic' in general—has come to be associated rather exclusively with a stimulation of the sexual senses, with sexual arousal. But one professor of religion and philosophy suggests that originally, *eros* meant more broadly, "to love or desire ardently", pointing to Greek mythology as providing some background for the language. In his book, *The Passionate Life*, Sam Keen explains:

*"Plato's myth of the androgyne gives the original meaning of eros. In the beginning, according to Plato, there were three kinds of human beings: man-man, woman-woman, and man-woman. Each unit was joined back to back, had four arms, four legs, and a single head with faces front and back. These hybrid creatures could either walk upright or run cartwheel fashion, but they could never face each other. When Zeus decided to divide and conquer these powerful beings, he split each unit down the middle so that a single person would henceforth be incomplete and would have to search for his or her other half. Thus we are now motivated by eros, by a profound longing to be reunited with our missing complement. Sexual love is only one of the many modes in which eros seeks to reunite us with what is missing."*<sup>3</sup>

In a certain sense, the even older creation myth that we know best—from Genesis Chapter Two—resonates with the idea that human beings long for a partner, for one who completes a once-unified person. According to our story, Eve is created when a part of Adam is removed from himself; the penultimate verses of Chapter Two read, "[T]he man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh' . . . Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh." (Genesis 2:34-24)

The desire for the other—as well as the implicit pain or alienation from perfection that that desire carries with it—is made explicit in our reading this morning, when God announces the way that Eve's fall to temptation will curse her: "To the woman God said, 'I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.'" (Gen. 3:16) So much, in fact, about a woman's experience of sexuality is contained in that little verse!

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<sup>2</sup> Rob Bell, *Sex God*, p. 30

<sup>3</sup> As quoted in Robert Shelton, *Loving Relationships*, 1987, p. 177.

James B. Nelson, an ordained minister and retired professor of Christian Ethics at United Theological Seminary in Minnesota, wrote a book in 1978 entitled, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology*. In it, he argued:

*“Our sexuality is at the center of our response to life. It is the way in which we are in the world as **embodied selves**, female or male, with certain affectional orientations, with qualities socially defined as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. It is a basic way in which we express both our incompleteness and our relatedness. It is God’s ingenious way of calling us into communion with others through our need to reach out and touch and embrace—emotionally, intellectually, physically. Sexuality thus is never accidental or peripheral to our possibility of human becoming. It is basic and intrinsic to that possibility. It is both the physiological and psychological grounding of our capacity of love.”<sup>4</sup>*

It was a watershed book in the United States, one that changed many Christian attitudes about sexuality and, more particularly, homosexuality—shifting the focus from sexuality as being about sexual acts, to the broader reality of sexuality as being about embodied and gendered experience, and expressions of mutuality and love.

One of the things that the Season of Lent invites Christians to do is to really engage the wonder of incarnation, of embodiment. We tend to talk a lot about the mystery of incarnation during Advent and Christmastime. And it’s easy to get caught up in the overwhelming hope and promise and joy of it all when we’re dealing with images of a newborn baby. I can’t think of anyone who’s witnessed a birth, or held a newborn in their arms, without responding with wonder, humility, and hope.

But Lent is really all about sinking ourselves more deeply into an awareness of what it means to be fully human, fully alive—as thoroughly integrated, embodied selves—with all of the awkwardness, frustration, fear, excitement, confusion, curiosity, wonder, and ecstasy that entails. These forty days that stretch in front of us invite us to journey with Jesus to the wilderness, which is where we’re told that God’s own Spirit led him before he was tempted by the devil.

For Jesus, the wilderness probably entailed a literal journey out of town, beyond the domestic comforts of a roof and a bed, away from the circle of friends with whom he swapped jokes and could distract himself from challenging thoughts or probing questions. But it was there—away from his creature comforts—that Jesus submitted both to the power of God, and to the temptation of the devil. And he returned from the wilderness with a clear and compelling sense of mission, purpose, and identity in God. So it’s a practice worth imitating, regardless of our age.

For you and me, the wilderness may feel like a place we’ve been driven to and have been existing in for quite a while now, a place we didn’t choose—at least, not consciously. Loneliness, misunderstanding, confusion, anxiety—any of these can make for fearsome wilderness experiences. I pray that those who are there recognise the Spirit of God leading and strengthening them in the wild.

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Shelton, *Loving Relationships*, pp. 179-80, emphasis mine. (Quoting Nelson, *Embodiment*, pp. 104-105.)

For others, it may need to be a place we withdraw to, within the confines of our domestic settings. It may be that our daily journey into the wilderness is that moment when we forego one of our favourite creature comforts because we know that chocolate, or wine, or the internet or television, has a way of numbing us to the presence of the holy—and of the diabolical.

Surely, if we intentionally withdraw to such a wilderness—even if it be within our own home—across these forty days, we will discover God’s own Spirit leading us, just as Jesus did.

The devil, of course, will meet us there too. The devil and the serpent in the Garden of Eden are two names for the same character. And you and I, if we’re attentive, will discover how that character is our own daily companion. The devil is that presence or facet within each of us that entices us to do that which is in opposition to what God wants. Curiously, the ideas often sound very much like our own internal voice, which can feel confusing and disorientating. Some modern readers of psychology might suggest that the devil and our human ego are one and the same. I’m not 100% comfortable with that, but there’s no doubt that our egos at the least play the devil’s happy accomplice.

Human temptations—whether in the wilderness or not—almost always appear reasonable, easily justified by the things we hold dear, whether habit, affection, custom, or creed. Jesus himself was tempted to use Scripture as a justification for an act that would ultimately have been destructive. But he refuted it, showing how Scripture was simply being twisted to justify a selfish and unloving end.

Desire. Longing. Appealing to that which feels unfulfilled. This is how temptation works—and yet, the promises of the tempter are never fully delivered. Invariably, *self* is the most important recipient for fulfillment and gratification, when the devil makes an offer. Other commitments, covenants, and relationships seem to fade to the background when the devil is involved. Always, the tempter invites us to imagine that we *deserve* better than what we have, and that the happiness or fulfillment we long for will be met by claiming the spoils being held out before us. We know it's a lie, but we still keep hoping it's not. And when we give in, the results are the opposite of what we hope for: we're seeking unity, wholeness, reconciliation. But we wind up with further alienation--from ourselves, from God, from those we love, from an experience of blessedness.

As we’ve observed across the past several weeks, if the Bible is consistent about anything, it certainly isn’t about sex. It is much more consistent about God’s desire for us to know love ourselves, and to extend hospitality and grace to one who seems a stranger, to the one who is different, reaching out in love and compassion—especially to those whom society rejects as unacceptable.

If we want to know what kinds of relationships are worthy of blessing, we need only ask whether and how they manifest the love of God above all else; how they serve the divine impulse of building others up in love and hope; how they incarnate divine care by fostering mutuality, trust, wholeness, and grace. This is what Jesus Christ taught us by his God-embodied life among us. May we go and do likewise. Amen.

