

Lent 1 A 2017

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

Psalm 32

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

This is a story about apple pie.
More or less.

On the back page of the New Yorker,
For several years now,
They've had a reader contest
Where you can submit captions
For a cartoon drawing.

At the top of the page,
There's a drawing with no caption,
And an invitation to try your hand
At writing something apt –
wittily profound,
silly,
surprising.

Underneath,
Three finalists from an earlier week,
And finally,
From the week before that,
The winning caption.

I don't usually like this contest much;
Most of the finalists leave me cold,
And it turns out I'm no good
At thinking of captions myself.

But I keep looking at it.

This week,
In the finalists' corner,
There was a drawing of a woman and a man
In a peaceful wooded glade.

The woman holds up an apple pie,
Fragrant steam slipping from the vents in the crust.

Did I mention they have no clothes on?
That a big snake is dangling down from one of the trees?

Never mind two of the possible captions.
This is the one that got my attention:

The woman holds up the pie.
The man scratches his head,
And says,
“I’ll be damned.”

(Or – I’ll be *damned*.)



The woman, the man,
The apple, the snake.

We can't get enough of this story,
We return again and again
To our foundation myth,
This gift of a story by which our ancestors
Tried to understand
What it means to be human,
Formed of the dust
And imagining the infinite,
Always reaching beyond ourselves
For the more.

And too often forgetting,
In our reaching,

That this moment – the temptation and fall –
is the second act
In the drama of being human.
We were not born broken.

This is what happened first:
In the cool of the morning,
The God who brings forth all life
Cradled dust in strong and tender hands,
And breathed the spirit into it,
And we began to be.

The creator of life rejoiced in us,
And gave us the world as a gift.
That's the beginning of the story.
That's the essence of what it means to be human.
We are dust enlivened by life itself,
Loved into being
By being itself.
Nothing can take that away,
Even death.
That's our story, forever.

And –
The story cracks and strains
In the second act we read today.

The first act speaks the deepest truth
About who we are –
Made for loving partnership,
For faithful stewardship,
For delight.

The second act speaks a bitter truth
That smudges and hides and twists
What has gone before.
We can be faithless,
Feeble, deceitful,
Self-pitying, judgmental,
Resentful,
Unkind.
We break things.
We tear them apart.
We hurtle into messes
And lose the way out.
Our lives are hard, bitter, and cruel.

We fall prey to many temptations,
To leave things undone,
To do things we know we should not,
To be untrue to our deepest nature
And abandon our highest purpose.
There is no way around this.

Or so the tempter would tell us.

The tempter tries to tell us
That the broken part is all there is.
And all of us,
No matter how good or strong we are,
All of us
Hear that voice,
And sometimes, we believe it.
We live in the world
As though the brokenness were the deepest truth.

That's a lie
That has been foisted upon us,
Over and over.
The blessedness of the beginning
Is the deepest truth,
Whether we can embrace it or not.

Jesus embraced that truth
In the desert,
On the cross,
And in the garden beyond the tomb.

Our sisters and brothers in faith,
The Muslims and the Jews,
Have their own ways of breaking through the brokenness
And embracing the truth.
This is our way.

When Jesus went into the desert,
Knowing he would hear the whispers of the tempter,
He began the journey that breaks the brokenness of the world apart.
It was hard and bitter work for him.

Jesus, if he was,
As we believe,
Fully and completely human,
Was, like us,

An inheritor of this foundation myth,
A descendant of Eve and Adam.

That means that the same serpent
Who whispered in Eve's ear in the garden,
Whispered in his ear in the desert.

Because they are different people,
The serpent dangles different lures in front of them.

Eve is snagged by her particular bright shiny object.
For her, the temptation is knowledge,
Creativity, inventiveness.
It begins with sniffing the forbidden fruit
And discovering it is fragrant and delicious.
Then, who knows how,
She bakes an apple pie.
I'll be damned,
Says her puzzled husband.
How did you manage to do that?

We are her children.
And, like her,
We value this courage and creativity,
The insight and imagination.
And we recognize that all this awareness
Makes us suffer.
We look back at the choice
They made,
Eve to take the apple,
Adam to follow her lead,
And we imagine our lives,
If they had chosen otherwise.
Would we be who we are?
Would we choose to be otherwise,
For all the suffering?

Eve holds out the apple pie.
Her husband sees the future.
I'll be *damned*, he says.
And takes the pie anyway.

Eve, and then Adam,
and we with them, are snagged.

Jesus is not – though he was sorely tempted.

Jesus is the inheritor
Not only of the story,
But of the human soul and spirit
That make us live the story over and over again
In the same way.

Except that he does not.

Jesus shows us, tells us
Lives for us,
Our first and better story.
He listens to the voice of the tempter,
Whispering words uniquely crafted
To ensnare him.
He listens,
And he stands firm.
He reaches beyond his human self
And connects with the wisdom of the ages.
He draws strength from the psalms of his people,
And from the law,
The gracious gift given to his ancestors
To keep them in the way of God.
He reaches deep within himself
And finds the spirit of God,
Enlivening his dust
As it enlivens ours,
And he embraces what is most true.
In him,
In this moment,
Our original blessedness,
Our limitless potential,
Our life-giving connection to the source of life,
This utter goodness prevails.

He becomes what we were born to be.

And so the tempter leaves him,
And slides away
To wait for another time.

There will always, for now,
Be another time.

The tempter will come back for him later,
In another garden,

And again goodness will prevail.

But the tempter comes for us as well.

The tempter speaks to us in many voices now:

The voices of power telling us
The world is terrible,
Rotten to the core,
dangerous
And we need to fight it
No matter what the means.

The slippery voices that tell us
We are not beautiful enough
Or desirable enough
And that we should turn ourselves inside out
To try to meet impossible ideals,
Forcing us make excuses for our inadequacy.

The anxious voices telling us we don't have enough,
That we need to hold tight to what we have
And grasp after more and more and more.

And now, in this time,
The voices trying to distract us,
Knock us off-base,
Exhaust us,
Divide us,
Shock us,
Weary us and render us helpless.

We are assailed by many temptations.
There is nothing new about this.

This is the same story we have told from the beginning.
Only the bright shiny objects,
The particular temptations, are different for today.
It's no longer an apple,
Or an apple pie.
But there are plenty of other lures.

And in the end,
Though they catch us over and over,
We are not trapped.

The New Yorker cartoon caption is clever,
And gets better the more ways
You take it apart and look at it.

It is apt,
But in the end,
It isn't true.

There is no condemnation now,
Because Jesus took another path,
And opened a way for all,
A way beyond the brokenness.

That path was harder and darker and longer
Than this moment in the desert,
But we're not there yet.

If he had not prevailed in this moment,
There would be no further steps along the way.

So pause with him here,
As we begin the journey of Lent.

Pause,
And think about what the tempter says to you
When you are alone and vulnerable
And your defenses are down,
When you are in the desert.

Think about what the tempter says to you,
Wonder if there is a way to shake the tempter off,
To tell the voice off,
To turn away,
Maybe this time.

But most of all,
Do this,
As we begin Lent.

Rejoice, and give thanks.
Because in Jesus the story takes another turn,
And heads back out of the desert.

If we follow him,
We will find our way home.

