

Genesis 3:1-13
First Sunday in Lent

Matthew 4:1-11

March 1, 2020

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

YOU’E NOT YOU WHEN YOU’RE HUNGRY

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The ad campaign was rolled out during Super Bowl XLIV in 2010 with one of the most memorable Super Bowl commercials in the past ten years. You may remember the commercial: A bunch of young men are playing a pick-up game of football. The quarterback fades back to pass and throws the ball to . . . Betty White! But before the ball reaches her, she gets slammed into a mud puddle. When she returns to the huddle, one of her teammates says, “Mike, what’s with you? You’re playing like Betty White out there!” Then Mike’s girlfriend offers Betty White a Snickers bar and says, “Here, eat this.” Betty White takes a bite and “turns back” into Mike. “Better?” his girlfriend asks. “Better,” says Mike. At the end of the commercial, the quarterback gets tackled hard to the ground — only this time, it’s Abe Vigoda, who says, “That hurt!” The commercial’s tagline — “You’re not you when you’re hungry” — has been called “one of the most recognizable brand slogans of today.” The entire ad campaign has won many awards and expanded into more than eighty countries. Since that first commercial with Betty White ran in 2010, many other celebrities have shown up in the Snickers ads.¹

“You’re not you when you’re hungry.” You know it’s true. Why, we even invented a word to describe one aspect of not being yourself when you’re hungry — “hangry.” You know the feeling of being bad-tempered or irritable when you’re hungry.

“You’re not you when you’re hungry.” That seemed like a good description of today’s Old and New Testament lessons about Adam and Eve in the garden and Jesus and the Devil in the wilderness. Both stories involve eating/not eating. Both stories involve the temptation to be someone you’re not when you’re hungry. Both stories describe the ramifications of your choices.

In the story about Jesus in the wilderness, Matthew tells us that after fasting for forty days and forty nights, Jesus was hungry. Some translations say “very hungry.” That’s no surprise! The Message emphasizes Jesus’ hunger and his vulnerability by translating, “Jesus prepared for the Test by fasting forty days and forty nights. That left him, of course, in a state of extreme hunger, which the Devil took advantage of in the first test.”

Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness are presented in very physical, tangible terms: turning stones into bread; throwing himself off the highest point in Jerusalem; bowing down to the Devil in exchange for earthly kingdoms. At the heart of these phys-

ical temptations, however, is the basic human sin and temptation — to exchange who we are and whose we are as God’s children for something of lesser value. Or, in other words, to try to be something we were not created to be. Or, even more exactly, not trusting God’s Word and God’s promise.

So, we read other stories in the Bible about eating and identity:

* In the garden of Eden, God told the man, “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.” But the serpent entered the picture and introduced the element of doubt into the relationship between God and the man and woman. The serpent said, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (Genesis 3:4-5)

Ah, there’s the rub and the temptation. Adam and Eve had everything they needed in life, including the most important thing of all, a right relationship with God. But they succumbed to the temptation to “be like God.” They saw that “the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise.” They were hungry for something which was not theirs to possess. And, when they ate, the consequences were dire.

* In the wilderness of Sinai, only two months after God had freed them with his mighty arm from slavery under Pharaoh, the Israelites were already complaining against Moses and Aaron: “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” (Exodus 16:2-3)

In other words, God delivered his people from bondage and promised to provide for them along the way — “I will be your God and you will be my people.” However, the people grumbled and complained against God and said, in so many words, “We would rather be Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt and eat our fill of bread than put our trust in the Lord God out here in the wilderness.”

* The day after Jesus had fed the 5,000 with the fish and loaves, the crowd went looking for him on the other side of the lake. When they found him, they asked him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” Jesus knew enough about human nature to know why they had searched him out. He said to the crowd, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.” (John 6:25-27)

Out there in the wilderness, famished after fasting for forty days and forty nights, Jesus was tempted by the Devil to be someone he was not called to be. It’s important to remember this wilderness story happens immediately after Jesus’ baptism. At the very end of that story, we hear a voice from heaven saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved,

with whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:17) So, when the Devil says to the exhausted, hungry Jesus, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread,” there is more at stake than Jesus satisfying his physical hunger and not being hungry any more. Jesus’ very identity and mission as the Son of God are on the line.

In a nutshell, the Devil appeals to that very basic temptation that we all share: trying to be something we are not created to be. The Devil uses Jesus’ frailty and vulnerability to tempt him not to trust God for his well-being and identity. Feed yourself, Jesus! Razzle dazzle the people, Jesus! Worship me and you’ll be king, Jesus! Satisfy your hunger for fame and personal acclaim and power and authority, Jesus! Be something other than what you were called to be, Jesus!

But Jesus resists the temptation to be something or someone other than the person God called him to be — “my beloved Son!” In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus preached a counter-cultural message when he called the people of God to remember who they are and whose they are, and said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” (Matthew 5:6) When Jesus described what kind of Messiah he was and what kind of followers he was looking for, he told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” (Mark 8:34, 36) In other words, making a deal with the Devil — trading your identity as a child of God for some temporary gain — will always end in sorrow and loss.

This hunger inside of us has been described in various ways through the centuries.

* In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine writes about how he tried to find fulfillment in life in everything but God himself. In his opening paragraph, Augustine asks, “Can any praise be worthy of the Lord’s majesty?” In other words, who are we as humans to worship and praise God Almighty? Augustine’s answer to that question is one of his most famous teachings: “The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.” (*Confessions*, Book 1, 1).

* Blaise Pascal was a 17th century French mathematician, physicist, inventor, writer, and Catholic theologian. A famous quote often attributed to him is, “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every person, and it can never be filled by any created thing. It can only be filled by God, made known through Jesus Christ.” In Pascal’s defense of the Christian religion, a book called *Pensées (or Thoughts)*, the quote is fleshed out a bit more, and speaks to the hunger of the human heart that can so easily tempt us to be something and someone other than who God created us to be. Pascal wrote, “What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and

trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.”

* George Herbert was an early 17th century Welsh-born poet and priest of the Church of England. He described our human hunger for God as a “pulley” that connects us to God. His poem “The Pulley” explains our need for God and echoes the restlessness that both Augustine and Pascal write about.

*When God at first made man,
Having a glass of blessings standing by,
"Let us," said he, "pour on him all we can.
Let the world's riches, which disperséd lie,
Contract into a span."*

*So strength first made a way;
Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honor, pleasure.
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that, alone of all his treasure,
Rest in the bottom lay.*

*"For if I should," said he,
"Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature;
So both should losers be.*

"Yet let him keep the rest,

But keep them with repining restlessness.

Let him be rich and weary, that at least,

If goodness lead him not, yet weariness

May toss him to my breast."

When we are content with ourselves, when we are tempted to be more than we were created to be, when we hunger to “be like God,” we will forget our place. We forget who we are and whose we are. When we’re hungry for what is not rightfully ours, we aren’t who God created us to be.

I’ve shared this before, and many of you have told me you had the same experience. I grew up hearing my parents’ parting words as I walked out the door, “Remember who you are and where you come from.” That’s the greatest temptation — to forget who we are and where we come from. In our hunger to be like God, we too often make short-sighted deals. We swap our true identity as children of God in a feeble attempt to be like God. This human hunger goes much deeper than resisting a second piece of chocolate cake (or even a first piece, for that matter!) or any other discreet, particular behavior and action. The great temptation is to swap our place and calling as God’s children for something/anything that always ends up empty and unsatisfying in the long run. But, as 1 John 3:1 reminds us, “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.” That is who we are. That is our true identity. And, as the psalmist so eloquently puts it, “O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.” (Psalm 34:8)

The Devil did, indeed, try to take advantage of Jesus’ extreme hunger. But Jesus knew life consists of more, much more, than bread in our stomachs, self-serving actions, and gaining short-lived treasures. When he resisted the temptations in the wilderness, Jesus not only taught us, but showed us how to live as children of God. He put into action what he taught in his Sermon on the Mount: ““Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

During this Lenten season, let us think about that Snickers tag-line. It’s true that “you’re not you when you’re hungry” — hungry for self-sufficiency, hungry for power, hungry for short-term gain, hungry for acclaim, hungry for having your own way.

But we can also turn that tag-line on its head — “you’re not you when you’re hungry” — hungry for God’s righteousness, hungry for God himself, hungry for the kind of life Jesus calls us to lead. When we’re that kind of hungry, we will find that we are not who we think we ought to be or want to be, but who we are truly meant to be: children of God.

Let us pray: Holy God, by the grace of Jesus Christ you know the tests and trials we face. Walk with us through this wilderness. Come to us with ministers of healing and visit us with messengers of hope, so that we may return to you in faith, believing the good news of the gospel; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

NOTES

¹This information about the Snickers ad campaign was taken from three different sources:

“2010: BBDO New York creates ‘You’re not you when you’re hungry’ campaign for Snickers with Betty White, March 31, 2016 at www.thedrum.com.

Case study: How fame made Snickers’ “You’re not you when you’re hungry” campaign a success, October 26, 2012 at www.campaignlive.com.

Snickers “Hungry?” Commercials at www.knowyourmeme.com.