



**Dr. James C. Howell**  
**Genesis 2:15-17 Matthew 4:1-11**  
**March 13, 2011**

Lent appropriately begins with two readings. We just heard them from Michael, two stories that express heartbreak and hope, brokenness and the possibility of healing. The first story takes place in the Garden of Eden and suggests that God created us for beauty. God created us for peace. God created us so that all would be well. But God gave us a choice. God plants a dangerous tree in the garden and if we avoid that tree, all is well, but if we seize the fruit of that tree, then everything falls apart.

Mark Twain once said "I don't know why Adam and Eve get so much credit. I could have done just as well as they did." If you hadn't lost an hour of sleep you'd have thought that was really funny. The fact is, we all do what Adam and Eve did. We say "I'd rather be God than serve God. I'd rather be the center of the universe myself; thank you very much. I want it all to be about me. I can make it on my own. I know what's best." This is what sin and brokenness is. It's countered, isn't it, by what Jesus does. Jesus doesn't begin in a beautiful place. Jesus goes to a very dangerous place, a very perilous place, and he chooses to go there. It's not that Jesus was, you know, about his life and he'd had a tough day or Jesus was in his life and he was assailed by temptation out in the world. Jesus chose to go into a perilous zone to test himself. "No, thank you, on my part I don't want to go out and test myself." but Jesus chose to do this, to go out and to test himself, to do battle against novice from the devil himself. That's pretty gutsy, to do battle with the devil himself.

We could have a little poll if we wanted and say "Do you believe in such a thing as the devil?" The most interesting Gallup poll I think I've ever read is the one that said that more than 80 percent of Americans believe there is a devil. It's an interesting number because it's more than doubled the number of Americans who attend church – fascinating. That would be funnier, too. I mean, how should we say it? The devil's not a red guy with a pitchfork who jumps out and says "I'm going to ruin your life." You figure that out. You run to the edge as fast as you could. No, instead, the devil, evil, presents itself as wonder and light and great promise. The devil promises you the moon and it looks like "Oh, all will be well." It's seductive. We get lured in and it doesn't appear to be evil. It appears to be good. It's tricky; it's sneaky.

For Jesus, his battle with evil, which was very personal for him, I think is well depicted in Martin Scorsese's film on the Nikos Kazantzakis' novel "The Last Temptation of Christ" where Jesus is out in the wilderness and when the devil comes and is in the form of this bird, this predator who violently flaps his wings and sinks his talons into the back of Jesus' neck, it's hard for Jesus. He's engaged in combat against the devil himself.

I have three quick thoughts on this before we move on to Holy Communion. The first is this: This story makes it very clear that Jesus' agenda is very different from ours. Our agenda in this world is all about success and effectiveness, pleasure, comfort, being cool – what else in a good life – a Duke victory, or to be an equal opportunity preacher, a North Carolina victory, if you will. This is how we define the good life. Jesus is utterly uninterested in such things and, in

fact, he shuns them. Jesus has another agenda. Jesus' agenda is humility, vulnerability, holiness, virtue, humble service. This is a very different agenda from ours. And what does it mean to understand Jesus' agenda and to realize that Jesus hasn't come to put some harm upon us? Jesus loves us more than we love ourselves. If we get aboard with his agenda then we truly discover life. We truly find our way home. The second thing is this: This story in Matthew Chapter 4 that Michael has read to you – this is important. This is not a "How to resist temptation" manual. I wish it were a "How to resist temptation" manual because I would read it and I would do whatever the directions were, and then I would never succumb to temptation ever again, and I would be noble and cool and wonderful and my life would not have many problems in it at all. But it is not a "How to resist temptation" manual. What this story suggests is that Jesus does what you and I are utterly incapable of doing. And Jesus does it precisely because you and I are utterly incapable of doing the right thing. You and I would turn the stones into bread every time. You and I would leap literally at the chance to fall into the loving arms of God. You and I, if we were offered the kingdoms of the earth, we would say "We'll take it and we'll do good with it. But Jesus doesn't turn the stones into bread. Jesus doesn't leap from the temple. Jesus doesn't even take power over the world itself. Jesus does what we cannot do. This is humbling, we admit. We would like to think that we're masters of our own existence, that we're free to choose the life that we want. The lesson of Lent, I think, is that we come to be overwhelmed by forces that are beyond ourselves and not just during Lent, but in all our lives. I read a story in The New York Times this morning that was interesting. It was talking about the earthquake and the tsunami in Japan. What it said was that the Japanese are the masters of preparedness. I mean, of all the countries in the world, the most prepared people ever for an earthquake and the tsunami would be the Japanese, more than the United States. I mean, if there's an earthquake in Port Au Prince and the buildings fall down, we're not surprised. They have shoddy construction. But in Japan they have sunk billions of dollars into the infrastructure. They have applied the greatest technology known to man to be able to withstand this kind of thing, and yet, they have been overwhelmed. It's a parable of the human life, isn't it? Is it we think that we can master our existence and manage it and make it come out well? But there are forces beyond ourselves and it's humbling. It's humbling and it's not the worst thing to be humble.

Lent is a season of being humble. It's actually audacious to take on giving up something for Lent. You know why? You might fail. My children the other night, they were about in a laughing fit remembering years that dad gave up something for Lent and he failed. Why that's funny, I don't know. It seemed to be funny to them. Give up chocolate, you're caught sneaking a brownie. Now that's no big deal, in and of itself, except the truth is we all make really big mistakes in life, don't we? We make big mistakes on things that really matter, not whether you sneak a brownie one day, but you discover that you actually hurt the people that you love. And you make decisions in life and you regret it forever. And you do things and it harms yourself. Your life becomes – you look behind you and there's this litter, this debris of mistakes that we have made. What we really need, we need some help. We need some mercy. And that leads me to the third thing: For some reason when I think about this story, I'm reminded of Charles Darwin – it's odd I know – there are Christians that I know who are engaged in lifelong combat against Charles Darwin. They think it's important for Christians to say "Darwin was wrong, Darwin was wrong." I think it's important for Christians to say Darwin was absolutely right. The reason is Darwin was absolutely right. Charles Darwin described life in the world where we find ourselves as follows: Here's what Darwin said. Darwin depicted our world flawlessly. He

said that the world is a battle and that victory goes to the strong. It's survival of the fittest. It's the clever who get ahead. It's those with power and strength and money who do well. There is also some dumb luck involved. Some people are just a total klutz but they seem to do well and other people, they just have bad luck – they just have bad luck. That's how Charles Darwin described the world and that is our world. And Jesus came into that Darwinian world where the strong win, where the clever get ahead, where the wealthy have it made. Jesus came into that world and said "I want to show you a better way. I want to turn your world upside down. I want to show you something that you've never ever seen in the Darwinian world" and we ask Jesus "What is it?" And Jesus says "I came to show you forgiveness." Forgiveness is not about the strong winning. Forgiveness isn't about dumb luck or the lack thereof. Forgiveness isn't about the clever getting ahead. Forgiveness is about mercy when you haven't earned it, when you're not the fittest, when your life is the debris of so many mistakes. It is mercy. This is not an exercise in negativity.

I remember the year that Robert Schuller said that he didn't think Lent was a very good idea. That just felt too negative to him. He said he would go for Lent if we could change it, and he suggested an acronym, L E N T – Let's Eliminate Negative Thinking. He does not get to negative thinking, but to think about our sin and brokenness. That's not negative thinking. It's the window to hope and joy. When we recognize our brokenness, when we come before God and say "I've made such a mess of my life" it's not negative; that's the window thrown open into hope and to life. Have you ever in your life been forgiven? Have you ever in your life forgiven? Have you ever been – there's not much of this in the world, is there? – Have you ever been shown mercy? When you're forgiven and shown mercy it's not negative. It's lovely. It's liberating. It's so giddy, so unexpected, so loving that you're tempted to laugh out loud, you're tempted to laugh. It's a wonderful thing. For years, why do people come to church? Nowadays people come to church and I know the questions that you have. You think "Will I find a parking place?" You think "Who will be preaching and will the sermon be good? Will it be too long? Will it be funny? Will it be – whatever? Will the choir sing? What will they sing? Will we have guests? Will I see my friends?" You see, we ask these questions. Through most of human history do you know why people came to church? They came seeking one thing and that is forgiveness. They knew they had made a mess of things in the past week and they needed some healing. They needed some mercy. And that's why they came to church because this is the place of mercy. I don't think out there in the corporate world there's a lot of mercy, but this is the place of mercy. And it can be that for us again. We can relearn what it means to come into the house of God and to seek forgiveness – to know mercy. There was that tree and Adam and Eve seized it, but then there was another tree, wasn't there? It was the tree where Jesus did not seize power. It was not the survival of the fittest that day but it was suffering of the most beautiful. It was the unjust suffering of the holy. Jesus gave himself for us and he did that to invite us home, to show us mercy.

We come to our Lord's Table today. We do not strut forward and present our resume of how good we have been and that we did it for God – no, we come as broken people, we come as humble people saying "I need mercy. I need forgiveness." And Jesus says "Welcome home, welcome home. Of course, you're broken. That's why I sent Jesus out into that wilderness to defeat the devil on your behalf as grace, as mercy, as forgiveness."

Thanks be to God.