FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

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*“Who’s Got the Power?”* Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

 Matthew 4:1-11

From the Genesis story of Adam and Eve’s conversation with a serpent to Matthew’s portrayal of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness, these readings cut to the heart of what it is to be human. Both readings ask us to confront the two choices that continue to challenge human living: will we trust God, or will we follow our own plans and strategies? Will we allow God’s ways and purposes define and guide us? Or will we insist on establishing our own identity, and allow our own inclinations and desires to determine our pathway forward?

In other words: who has the power in our lives?

Oh yes, before I go any further, I apologize for *that*! I kept looking at it this week and thinking there is something wrong with that title but I could not identify it. Those of you have manuscripts notice I have corrected it because it finally dawned on me last night! It is not “Whose,” it is “Who’s.” *Who* Has the Power?

The first choice—trusting God—means that we will need to be faithful to the One who has loved us into being, into life. This is the One who is love, and because love is always creative, so Genesis describes how God’s love created a world and a garden, and filled it with every good thing required for human living and flourishing.

The second choice is most vividly described in the last sentence of the reading we heard from Genesis. Despite having everything they needed to live well—including a purpose for living: to care for and nurture creation—Adam and Eve still ate fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They violated what had been the one prohibition God had given them.

Immediately, as Genesis 3:7 tells us: “*…the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.”*

The part of that sentence I would like to emphasize is that last phrase, “*they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.”*

Before that moment, everything they needed had come from God, had been provided through their relationship with God. Now that their eyes were “opened,” suddenly what God had provided was not enough. Suddenly, they felt the need to rely on their own perception of right and wrong, and their own assessment of what they needed.

The unique relationship with God wherein God knew and furnished their every need had been displaced by their own calculations, their own intentions and design. Because of this, when God next came into the garden, they hid. They hid themselves so that God would not see their nakedness, which they perceived to be their deficiency or brokenness. They thought they could hide this from God.

One commentator describes it in this way:

*“the serpent calls into question God’s trustworthiness by suggesting that there is more to the story than God let on. In this way the serpent sows the seeds of mistrust, inviting Adam and Eve to fulfill the deep want and need that is at the core of being human not through their relationship with God but by seizing the fruit that is in front of them. It is the temptation to be self-sufficient, to establish their identity on their own, that seduces the first humans.”*

During Lent, this is what we are called to recognize. This is what we are asked to reflect on and examine in our own lives, but also in the life of our community, and in the world.

To help us understand the seriousness of our choices and the new chance at better choices God is offering to human beings, the synoptic Gospels tell us that Jesus was confronted by the same temptations. Indeed, Jesus is also invited to believe that he does not have to rely on God for a life of strength, power, safety, and fulfillment. In the passage we heard from Matthew, each temptation invites Jesus to turn away from trust in God in a different way.

In the first, the devil invites Jesus to prove his sonship through a display of power; that is, by establishing his validity and worth through his own abilities. Turning stones into bread to satisfy his physical hunger assumes Jesus’ ability to work a miracle. When Jesus refuses to comply, Jesus does not deny his hunger. He does not deny that hunger is real.

Instead, he is affirming that he will not use the power God has given him for only his own needs. To have turned the stones into bread would have signified that every strength God has given him was only to preserve his own life. Such power would have little or nothing to do with serving others, nor with offering deliverance to others through obedience and loving service.

Thankfully, Jesus’ heart and mind and spirit are focused on the ministry God has sent him to accomplish among God’s beloved people. We see that most clearly in the stories that are to follow—especially in the feeding of the five thousand. When confronted by the hunger of an afternoon—not the forty days of hunger in the wilderness—Jesus’ compassion for the five thousand—for God’s beloved people— causes him to turn five small loaves and a few fish into enough for all to eat their fill and be satisfied, and even for there to be leftovers.

The second trial asks Jesus to test God’s loyalty to him by saving him from death. As we know, Jesus’ life and his ministry will lead him to suffering and death. By refusing to be tempted, Jesus also asserts that life—his life and ours—is not going to avoid all moments of suffering. However, neither his suffering, or ours, will go uncared for or unnoticed.

Again, in the story of his life and ministry after this time of temptation, Jesus is seen, again-and-again, using the power of love to raise people from sickness, from possession, and even death. Each instance of healing and wholeness does not preserve life only for its own sake, nor is it a test to see if God or Jesus’ power is real. Each time Jesus reaches out to touch and make whole his actions are meant to glorify God. Each time he teaches God’s compassion and God as healer, his intention is to call attention to the faithfulness of God.

In the third temptation — more an out-and-out bribe than temptation — Jesus is promised all the power and glory the earth can offer if he will give his allegiance and devotion to the Tempter.

In his book *[The Word Before the Powers](http://www.amazon.com/The-Word-Before-Powers-Preaching/dp/0664222331%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank%22%20%5Co%20%22The%20Word%20Before%20the%20Powers)*, Charles Campbell tells the story in more contemporary language, like this:

*“All of the kingdoms can be yours,” the devil tells Jesus, “if you will just lord your power over others and take up the sword of the nations.  Take charge of the biological weapons, deploy some troops, command the implementation of a `Star Wars’ missile defense system [or a drone warfare program].  All the kingdoms can be yours–if you will just use the world’s means of power:  domination and violence.”*

This is a bald-faced bribe that requires that Jesus abandon his relationship with God altogether—*Jesus Christ, Superstar!* This is what he is being offered.

Thank goodness Jesus refused. But I also thank goodness that this story was preserved for us because Jesus is not the only one who is solicited in such ways. We may not personally be offered inducements on this scale. However, we all know that these things are often offered to us as a community and as a nation all the time.

One of the ways this is most vividly pointed out to us is in the area of how we spend our money. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who’s said so many wonderful things throughout his lifetime, also coined the phrase that says: “a budget is a moral document.” He went on the declare:

*“A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”*

Now he said that many years ago, many, many decades ago. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, in 2016, our country spent $611 billion on the military. That was nearly three times more than China spent in the same year, more than the next seven nations combined.

In his 1953 speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, U.S.  President Dwight Eisenhower – former World War II five-star army general – strikingly declared this: *“Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed…The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities…It is two fine, fully equipped hospitals.”*

Even allowing for inflation, President Eisenhower’s words are still true for us today. How we spend our money—as a nation and as individuals—tells us who and what has the power in our lives. How we spend our time, our energy, who holds our attention and our trust—these are all moral choices that need to be examined. Each of these things will determine who has the power over our lives.

As we enter this Lenten season, I pray that we will take deeply into prayer the questions these readings ask us. I pray we will not be afraid to be honest with ourselves, and that we will not be ashamed of the answers that we will find.

As we enter Lent, let us open ourselves to the love of Christ who goes with us, and whose Spirit will never leave us. And I hope that we will find new depths of strength and mercy toward others, and ourselves as God has mercy towards us.

Let this be so. Amen.