

Faith Mennonite Church
March 9, 2014 - Lent 1
Encountering God
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It's not about YOU—or ME!
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

I would like to express my appreciation to the group who planned and led our Ash Wednesday Taize Service (Sandy Westby, Karen Wiebe, Jenny Wandersee, Phil Stoltzfus, and David and John Mayou) and also the planning group for our Sunday worship during Lent (John Hershey, Joan Kreider, Cynthia Miller, and John Ratigan). Their work all began during my sabbatical and I was able to return and simply join in.

The worship theme for this Lent, as you noted on the cover of the bulletin is “Encountering God.” The Bible presents us with many stories of encounter with God. These stories typically help us to understand God in a deeper way, and if we use them as an invitation to reflect on our own encounters, they can help us understand ourselves in a deeper way as well. When we combine these dual encounters, with God and with self, we have a recipe for transformation and growth.

There are many ways we encounter God. Our favorite ways, no doubt, are the painless ones: in nature, skiing or hiking, taking in a beautiful sunrise or sunset over water, or gardening and watching the miracle of growth of seeds in soil. Many of us encounter God in music. We encounter God as we read, hear, discussion contemplate and pray with the Bible. These are ways we *choose*, ways we *seek* to encounter God. But the biblical stories we will hear this season are more often chance encounters, unexpected happenings not necessarily in beautiful settings: the woman who finds Jesus at the well, Mary and Martha’s encounter with the death of their brother Lazarus, the prophet Ezekiel’s encounter with dry bones in a valley, the blind man whom Jesus’ heals confronting opposition from religious authorities who question his experience.

Like theirs, our most profound encounters with God often come in ways that we might not at first recognize as encounters with God—conflict, opposition, limitation, disappointment, and temptation. But times of challenge are fertile soil for germinating seeds of growth in our understanding of God and ourselves and leading us to greater commitment to following the way of Christ.

Our scripture passages from Genesis and Matthew provide encounters that come in the form of temptation, in very different settings: Adam and Eve are in the primal garden when consciousness is just beginning and all of their needs are supplied. Jesus, by contrast, is in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry, in a vision quest setting, where he has been fasting. Now you might say, wait—these stories aren’t about encounter with God but with someone or something that tempts them *away* from God. Let’s hold that thought.

As we read the Genesis passage in our Tuesday morning discussion group—the story that has traditionally been called “the fall” and considered to be the entrance of sin in the human story—one of our group questioned whether Eve and Adam’s seduction by the serpent and eating of the forbidden fruit actually constituted sin. Was this the first sin or was the first sin the murder that happened in the following chapter when Cain killed his brother Abel. That seems far more grave. Indeed, some Jewish interpretations of this passage consider it to be a story not of “the fall” but rather of the human movement into consciousness and responsibility. Some commentators note that Eve was attracted to beauty of the fruit and the serpent’s promise of wisdom: two values that we appreciate and consider part of the best of humanity. Indeed, Adam and Eve were not fully human until they had some agency.

I would suggest that the sin, the fall, the error in this primal encounter with temptation was not the sheer disobedience—eating the fruit. Rather, the serpent, part of God’s creation, convinced Eve and Adam to think that they were most important in the moment—it was all about them...how *they* would become wise...how *they* would delight in the fruit. They had what we would consider an idyllic relationship with God. God spoke to them directly. God had invited Adam to take part in creation by naming the creatures. God had created a human partner when none of the animals fully satisfied Adam’s

loneliness. God was attentive, responsive, communicative—imminent not distant. Yet in this moment, that all fell away.

Eve could have put the serpent on hold and said, “Wait a minute. Let’s talk this over with God. We don’t know why God set this limit. We hadn’t initially thought about it being restrictive. Could observing a limit also lead to wisdom? Could foregoing a potential pleasure provide a different form of satisfaction? Can discipline bring freedom? Let’s talk to God.”

Instead, Eve, with Adam silently at her side, took the bait and let the serpent hook her with the notion that *she*, that *they*, were all that mattered in the moment. It was all about them, their pleasure and their wisdom. The intimate relationship they had shared with God was broken because they acted alone.

We note a contrast that when Jesus went to the wilderness he was by himself; he had no human companions with him. He had not yet called his circle of disciples. But his focus, his center, his intimate relationship with God remained steady. Three times he was tempted to put himself at the center, with that taunting word “if.” *If* you are the Son of Man...do this...do that. This was a challenge to his very identity, a challenge to prove who he was. But rather than defend or prove himself or suggest that what he did was most important, he deferred to God, to the words of truth that had formed him. Physically alone, he drew on the resources of his family and community of faith, and of the Spirit that resided within him. Each response to the tempter was a direct quote from scripture.

Where do we find ourselves in these stories? We obviously don't reside in Eden, yet our life in the United States with an abundant supply of resources is probably more like Eden than the wilderness and fasting of Jesus' temptation. Like Adam and Eve who were surrounded by abundance, yet could be tricked to think that their lives were lacking, we can easily be tempted by consumer culture to think that we do not have enough—that one more thing could make us happier, one more piece of knowledge make us more interesting. We're tempted away from communion with the Source of meaning. We're tempted away from trust in the Creator of all things.

Like Jesus in the wilderness, we too face the temptation to prove ourselves...to prove that we're in control, to prove that we're important, that we're making a difference in the world. One commentator suggested that Jesus' temptations were temptations to *not* accept his full humanity and to live with limitations. We, too, struggle with limitation; we like to push at boundaries. And the way that Jesus withstood this temptation, was ironically, to accept limitation and to turn toward God as his source of identity and purpose. In this moment he chose to be used by God, not to *be* God.

We cannot avoid temptation but we can use it as a way to encounter God. When we are tempted to believe we are not good enough, that some thing or some experience will make us happier, that we need to be in control and make the world right, that it's all about me, let's pause and take a break. We can read and recall scripture. We can seek out a trusted friend, a brother or sister in Christ, and ask for a second opinion. We can contemplate and pray.

God wants to come to us. God has come to us through Christ. God is present with us through the Spirit. Let us use temptation to draw us to God.