

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

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded 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, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die..."

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it or you shall die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You're not going to 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." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eye, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband who was with her and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

MATTHEW 4:1-11

Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But Jesus answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord

your God to the test.”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.’” Then the devil left him and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

EXPRESSING OUR FAITH: PART I

SHADES OF GRAY

GENESIS 2:15-17; 3:1-7
MATTHEW 4:1-11

Salman Rushdie is truly one of the great authors of our time who has the unique ability to present the existential and spiritual dilemmas humans face by bringing them to life through rich characterizations that are both humorous and penetrating. In his most recent novel entitled, “Quiochotte”, Sancho is an early adolescent who desires to run away and to fund his adventure, steals money from his aunt whom he is visiting in New York to make his get-away. In Genesis, we have a talking serpent. In Rushdie’s story, we have a talking cricket who personifies Sancho’s conscience. Let’s listen in to Sancho’s internal dialogue:

...How amazing was it that for \$146 stolen from your aunt’s pocketbook you could get a thirty-one hour Greyhound ride right to the center of a faraway small town like Beautiful, Kansas with no connections to make or snafus en route? And a related question: Was he about to go to jail, to be sent to Rikers to be monstered by the monsters residing there or was he on the verge of being free? Follow your spirit, he told himself.

Then the talking cricket, Grillo Parlante, was on the bench beside him, buzzing

with annoyance. *“There are persons who are undeserving of what has been done for them,”* it said. *“Unworthy persons. I am sorry to discover that you yourself are a person of this sort.”*

“You’re back,” Sancho said. “I thought you were gone for good.”

“I also thought this,” said the cricket. “But your descent toward a moral abyss has obliged me to return. I am unhappy about this, but I am here because there are things that must now be said.”

“Spare me the lecture,” Sancho said. “I know what I did and I don’t need to be scolded.”

“The question to be answered,” said the cricket, “is what is it to be a man, and have you passed that examination?”...

“Look at me,” Sancho said. “Flesh and blood. I live and breathe and think and feel. What more do you want?” I’m a genuine human person.”

“Without a conscience,” said the cricket, “you’re not even a genuine chimpanzee.”

(“I know I’m young,”) Sancho said, “but I have noticed that conscience isn’t a major requirement in human affairs. Ruthlessness, narcissism, dishonesty, greed, bigotry, violence, yes.”

“It would not be prudent to make such a judgment based on the TV news,” said the cricket. “Many people remain who know the difference between good and evil, and who let their conscience be their guide.”

Yes, it is Lent and, yes, it is a time when we traditionally examine ourselves in an effort to grow in our spirituality. And we have similar themes of temptation and seduction in both of our scriptures. And within these narratives, we have motifs featuring the human struggle with desire to reach beyond the boundaries of acceptable or even legal behavior to taste of the forbidden fruit. And at stake in these struggles is the health of our souls and the core of who we are as people. And in this day and age when we seem to be living in a post truth era, and have a national crisis on our hands, it is not just our individual souls that are being tested, it is the soul of our nation as well.

The Genesis account of what is traditionally known as “first sin”, the brazen act of disobedience to God’s prohibition from eating the forbidden fruit is as delightful as it is profound. The serpent, of course, represents our desire to experience what is morally unacceptable and the passion behind our lust. But it also represents the internal debate we have when faced with a choice about our pending actions. It’s the “Oh, what does it really matter—who is going to find out anyway?” conversation we have with ourselves just before we bite from the fruit; before we take that drink that will catapult us from the wagon of sobriety we have worked so hard to achieve. “You’re not going to die if you do this!” It is the power struggle we engage in with our Higher Self. And in that sense, it is all about our spiritual integrity. But what we don’t see coming is the moment of exposure when our eyes are opened and we know we are naked and everyone can see.

Now the account of Jesus’ 40 days of fasting in the wilderness highlights the testing he had to go through to qualify him for the mission for which he was chosen that would involve at the end torture and the sacrifice of his body. The temptations were necessarily severe. Could he overcome the anguish? Could he resist turning stones into bread to feed himself after 40 days of fasting? Our flesh calls out to us for many pleasures, for many antidotes to physical and emotional pain, some of which are addictive or immoral or illegal. “Don’t worry, you won’t die. Nobody will know and you’ll feel better.”

The second temptation focuses on any sense of entitlement he might have because of his appointment to this mission. What’s the Quid Pro Quo he might expect in return? Special considerations? “If you loved me, you would do this favor for me.” But it is the third temptation that is the most climactic. *The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”*

Another Quid Pro Quo. And there it is: who will you choose to worship?

Temptation is about a spiritual conundrum; it is about choosing not only what we want, but what we are willing to sacrifice. How far does our faith extend? Are we willing to stand up for justice, fairness and equality? We face situations every day where our moral fiber is tested, some of them are subtle and some of them are blatant. And sometimes they are shrouded in Shades of Gray. For example, a story hit the news wires recently about a gentleman in California who bought a used sofa at an estate sale. When he got it home, his wife complained that one of the cushions didn't feel right—like it had something rough inside. He agreed it was odd so he carefully cut it open to see what was going on. And to his astonishment, it was stuffed with \$43K in cash.

Legally, of course, it was his. Finders/Keepers. He had purchased the couch and the money came with it. But what did he do? He went back to the vendor and they contacted the relatives of the deceased man who had owned it and returned the money to his heirs. What would you do?

A month ago, a Miami man who knew he had been exposed to COVID-19 and was experiencing symptoms did the right thing by going and being tested. The bill was \$3200 of which insurance only picked up \$1800 leaving him with an out-of-pocket bill of \$1400. What would you do?

My son once found a muddy 50 dollar bill in the street by the curb when he was riding his bike and asked me what I thought he should do. I, of course, asked him what he thought he should do and he wavered between keeping it or taking it up to the police station. So we then discussed the merits of each choice—what chance there was that somebody would have reported it missing, the relative value of 50 dollars versus a hundred or a thousand and whether it could ever be realistically returned to its rightful owner. He assessed the options and said, "I think I'll keep it." And I said, "Fine." What I really wanted him to do was wade through the shades of gray and have the experience of making a difficult choice.

Temptation is tough. And if we are looking to our elected officials to be shining

examples of leadership over how we should handle it—well, good luck with that! Many have sold their souls to the devil—reelection being the only thing on their minds. But my point is, whatever we do when confronted with choices that force us to think through the role faith plays in our lives, we must understand that our decision will inevitably impact more than just ourselves. The virus is certainly teaching us that. And that’s the dilemma. As Jesus said, *Enter by the narrow gate. The gate is wide that leads to destruction and there is plenty of room on the road and many go that way; but the gate leading to life is small and the road is narrow, and those who find it are few.* Indeed, choices always have consequences.

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