

Yesterday morning I read the newspaper account of the woman in Detroit who had apparently been dead for several years, sitting with her coat on in her garage, never missed in all that time by anybody. The neighbors are horrified that they did not realize; they thought that she was traveling. Her yard was mowed, her bills paid through automatic payments until her bank account finally ran dry, resulting in the foreclosure of the house. That's how her body was finally discovered, after all those years. I mention this because I keep thinking of all the decisions this woman must have made that made it possible for nobody to miss her. I guess she was not very active in a church or synagogue, and I guess she did not stay in touch with any family or friends. Obviously she was not close to her neighbors. She lived totally alone. So I wonder about the choices she must have made in her life to end up apparently never being missed when she died.

Our choices, large and small, make a difference in our lives. Often they make a difference in the lives of other people, and always they make a difference - good or bad - for us. If we smoke cigarettes, we spend a sizable portion of our money on something that hurts our bodies. If we eat too much junk food, we must wear the results and deal with the health consequences. If we choose to lie about something, we have to try to keep our story straight, which can be a real stress. Our choices make a difference.

The two scripture lessons today tell of two different episodes of choices made by human beings, with two completely different results. The first, in the idyllic garden of Eden, came about when a sneaky serpent sidled up to Eve and asked, "Did God REALLY tell you that you may not eat from ANY tree in the garden?" She fell into his trap, and the next thing we know, the man and woman succumbed to the temptation, trying to be like God, eating of the very fruit God had forbidden them to eat. It's a familiar story, one often troubling to parents, who wonder why God didn't seem to grasp what parents so quickly find out: Whatever is declared untouchable is the VERY thing a child finds most alluring!

So Adam and Eve touched and ate, and their eyes were opened, and they were filled with shame, to such an extent that they hid when they heard God coming near... The beauty and peace of the Garden were ruined for them...

Today's other story of temptation and choice took place in anything BUT a sweet, peaceful garden. Right after Jesus was baptized, he was driven into the wilderness, "to be tempted by the devil," Matthew tells us. He fasted for a long period, 40 days and nights... Then the tempter approached him, suggesting first that the famished Jesus could use his power - if he really was the Son of God - to turn stones into bread. Then the tempter suggested, by quoting scripture - that Jesus should test out the promise in the Bible that the angels would keep him from being hurt. And finally, the tempter offered to give Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would just fall down and worship Satan....

There in the wilderness, Jesus, unlike Adam and Eve, managed to keep his equilibrium. He was tempted in terms of personal need, trust of God's care, and the lure of personal gain and power, but he remembered who he was, and remained the Son of God. Jesus' wilderness choices continued to sustain him, even through the pain of the cross, and they continue today to give us a "high road" for our own choices in life.

Temptation is no stranger to any of us. Often our temptations are not big or obvious. "The safest road to Hell is the gradual one - the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts." - C.S. Lewis *The Screwtape Letters* The most difficult temptations are the subtle, gentle ones. I have never been tempted to kill, or to cheat on my husband, or to steal something from a store. But the more subtle temptations are more difficult...

A woman named Dorothy told about how she had fallen into a web of temptation. She'd felt cheated by that fact that her husband had left her, that she had to work at a low paying job to make ends meet for herself and her daughter. It didn't seem right that other kids had so much and her daughter could never catch up. So when she did not have the money for a video game in the store, and the sales clerk had left it out on the counter, Dorothy picked it up and put it in her pocket. "At first I thought that I would never walk out the door with it--or if I did that I would say I meant to pay for it, but the clerk left and I forgot. So I took it. I just took it and I justified it to myself that it was ok because the store wouldn't miss it since they had plenty, and because I really wanted my kid to have it and because I felt life had cheated me so I was justified in breaking some of the rules. At first it didn't seem so bad. But then I did it again and again, and I made a coat with a lining I could drop merchandise into, and I was good at it. Then one night I woke up with a horrible dream. I was walking out of the store and all of the merchandise was following me. And I tried to run, but all the stuff just ran after me, I couldn't stop it. The guard grabbed me and told me I had to pay for all of those things. And I woke up and realized I did have to pay for those things--one way or the other. But I didn't quite know how."

"If I had stopped then, I could have made things right. I tried, I decided not to take anything else. It worked until the money ran low once again. So I took a few more things, and a few more, and I was at it again. And I guess I would be still stealing today except for the fact that my dream came true. No, I didn't get caught shoplifting, my daughter did. And when I went to pick her up at the police station, I looked into her eyes and I knew whose fault it was that she was there. So I pleaded guilty to my crimes as well." (from an old sermon - source has been lost)

Temptation. Most of our temptations are not "documentable." They do not show themselves as moments in a desert, or as a black-and-white choice between obedience and disobedience. The world in which we live is a wilderness, saturating our minds with television images of non-reality; luring us into complacency with our own consumerism; convincing us that there is no way in the world what WE do can really make a difference.

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul warned Timothy and the others of the early church that they must stay centered in the gospel, and not get pulled off the path by senseless controversies or quarrels. He also warned of rough days coming, the description of which sounds quite contemporary:

3:1-5 "You must understand this, that in the last days distressing times will come. For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, slanderers, without self-control, savage, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to the outward form of godliness but denying its power. Avoid them!"

We have turned away from God in subtle ways and in ways not so subtle. In Genesis, Adam said yes to the fruit of the forbidden tree, and we have been saying yes ever since. He didn't disobey and take the fruit because he was too weak to say no. He rebelled in a desire to be strong, to know for himself, to stand on his own two feet, to be Creator rather than creature. Yes, I will have knowledge. Adam and Eve CHOSE to disobey the rule God had given them.

I share a story, entitled, "It's All the Fault of Adam": Long ago and far away there lived a poor woodcutter named Iyapo. Every morning he arose very early to cut wood and at the end of the day to sell it. "Wood! Wood!" he cried. "It's all the fault of Adam! Good wood for sale!" Selling his wood, he managed to eat for another day.

One day the king heard him. "Why does that man cry, 'It is all the fault of Adam'?"

No one knew, so the king sent for Iyapo. "Your name means 'Many Troubles,' but why do you blame Adam for your misfortune?" asked the king.

"If it were not that Adam disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden, we would still be happy there and I would not have to work so hard to earn my daily bread," explained the woodcutter.

The compassionate king said, "This is not fair, that someone else's disobedience causes you so much grief," and he ordered new clothes and a room in the palace for Iyapo. "From this day you may call me brother. All I have I share with you, except for the green door at the end of the hall. That door you must never open."

"Sire, you have given me all I need or want. Surely I should be content!"

The woodcutter enjoyed the days that followed. He ate and dressed well. Amusing himself, in the king's palace he forgot the past pain of hunger. Then one day he noticed the green door. From that day the green door attracted him like a magnet, drawing him closer and closer day after day. Then one day the king was called away from the palace and he told Iyapo, "Look after the palace."

"If I am responsible for the palace, that means the room behind the green door, as well, but I will only peak and the king will never know." Lifting the latch, Iyapo looked inside. There was nothing there but his old clothes and his bundle of wood, until suddenly a small mouse ran out of the door and into the hallway. "The mouse...that is why the king is so careful!"

Iyapo ran after the mouse, but with all he had eaten, he was slow and could not catch it. Suddenly the king's voice rang through the halls: "What are you doing?"

Iyapo fell to his knees. "I am sorry about your mouse." "What mouse?" said the king. "I have no mouse."

"The mouse ran out when I opened the green door."

"So you opened the door and it was the one thing I told you that you must never do." The king studied Iyapo.

"As the king's brother I thought..." stammered Iyapo.

Now the king was angry. "You felt you must be the king himself! And you thought Adam was disobedient! Go to the green door and take your ragged clothes and wood, but know this: your misfortune is not the fault of Adam!"

Iyapo arose and put on his ragged clothes, lifted the bundle of wood to his shoulder, and left the cool palace for the hot marketplace, calling, "Wood! Wood for sale." Such were the words he shouted day after day, but never again did he mention the name of Adam.

(- Nigerian folk tale told by Barbara Walker and used in school curriculums, shared in other sources as well)

*All* have sinned and fallen short of what God has asked of us (love God, love our neighbors). But we need not hold ourselves to the sin of Adam, for we have been given ANOTHER story, the story of one man who **CHOSE** to be obedient, to never turn from God's way. I Corinthians 15 tells us, "As in Adam all die, so in Christ will all be made alive." (I Cor. 15:22) In one stunning act of obedience, there in the wilderness, Jesus placed God's word and will over his own hungry desire, and reversed the course of human history. He gave us a path of giving up "self" for something larger, and then he promised to walk with us every step of the way as we try to follow his way,

God will not coerce us, for God yearns for us to make the choice to love and obey God. But God has provided a way for us to proceed in faithfulness: we can follow Jesus, and use him as a model and an ever-present guide. May we move beyond the choice of Adam; may we choose the way of Jesus. By this, our every day decisions and actions will be an offering to God as they draw us more and more into God's love. Amen.