

Sermon – “Subversive Serpents”

Sunday, February 26, 2023

Scripture: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

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This past Ash Wednesday many of us began our Lenten journey partaking of Holy Communion. In the “breaking of the bread” we remember the brokenness Christ embraced when he climbed the Tree of Life and in the “taking and eating” we affirm the new life Christ offers in the kingdom of heaven. On our journey toward Holy Week, our first scripture reading in Genesis (2:15-17 and 3:1-7) takes us back to the Garden of Eden and to another “taking and eating.” We are introduced to the subversive serpent who succeeds in deceiving Eve and Adam. When they ate the fruit from the forbidden tree to become “like God,” rather than gaining immortality, the consequences of this symbolic act are lost innocence and the facing of their mortality in the wilderness of life. Listen to the Word of God:

15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17 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." 1 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 any tree in the garden?" 2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3 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." 4 But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; 5 for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, 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. 7 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. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is Matthew 4:1-11. We begin the Season of Lent with the traditional reading of Jesus’ 40-day journey into the wilderness. This passage is not intended to be taken as a historical or literal narrative. Like the Garden of Eden story in the Book of Genesis, this vignette is intended to teach a truth about life. Jesus’ journey into the wilderness follows his baptism, where the clear, strong voice of God affirms who Jesus is. In the wilderness, Jesus finds himself surrounded by other voices, crafty and subtle, not unlike the voice of the serpent Adam and Eve confront. When these voices tempt him to forget who he is and the journey that is his, Jesus finds his own voice. Listen to what the Spirit is saying:

1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3 The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4 But Jesus answered, "It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" 5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "God will command God’s angels concerning you," and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" 7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9 and he said to Jesus, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 10 Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.'" 11 Then the devil left Jesus, and suddenly angels came and waited on him. Amen.

The title of the sermon “Subversive Serpents”

The text: “*Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. Genesis 3:1a*”

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, speak to us with authority and tenderness that we may embrace our humanity with all its limitations, resist the subversive voices, and be strengthened for our journeys, Now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The late Mary Oliver was a poet from Maple Heights, Ohio. She won the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize. Writing in the vein of Whitman and Thoreau, Oliver was known for her vivid and powerful depictions of nature.

The first time I remember reading a Mary Oliver poem was at the memorial service of my father-in-law, Will Kieffer in 2006. Her poem “When Death Comes” was on the back of the memorial bulletin. As I sat in the lovely New England Episcopal Chapel, I marveled at the beauty of the language, the insight, and the meaning of the poem. It was an honest reflection on facing the mystery of death with hope and wonder...of accepting the limitations of our mortality by embracing the opportunities life presents us along the way.

Peter’s dad Will and his wife Ann embraced the opportunities life presented them. Given an early retirement and an empty nest, they chose to embark on 25 years creating art together as sculptors. On my fortieth birthday I received an unexpected and symbolic gift from Ann and Will: an apple carved in marble with a single bite missing. As a minister, wife, and mother turning 40, this was a poignant reminder, not only of my mortality, but also of God’s grace. Three years later when Peter turned forty, he received a similar gift. To complete the story of Adam and Eve with a humorous reflection on Eve’s temptation and Adam’s indulgence: Peter’s apple carved in marble has two bites missing.

Will’s memorial service was a celebration of a life well lived. Today I would like to share another poem by Mary Oliver as we reflect together on the subversive voices along the way. The title of the poem is *The Journey*.

One day you finally knew what you had to do,
and began, though the voices around you
kept shouting their bad advice—
though the whole house began to tremble
and you felt the old tug at your ankles.
"Mend my life!" each voice cried.
But you didn't stop. You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy was terrible.
It was already late enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen branches and stones.
But little by little, as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice which you slowly
recognized as your own, that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper into the world
determined to do the only thing you could do—
determined to save the only life you could save.

This is a poem, according to author Nicholas Gupta, about the journey one takes through life to become an individual, one's own person. *The voices around us shouting their bad advice* are the voices of society insisting we conform. The speaker leaves us with the daunting task of finding our own voice, in a world where society seems to speak for everyone.

Listening to one's heart, according to Oliver, is the way to find one's voice. As we depart on the journey that Mary Oliver invites us to take, it is not too long into it when we hear other voices. *Mend my life! Each voice cried.* As with any society, there are always people in need of help. We are called to care for one another but in so doing we must listen to our own voice and not lose our way.

Oliver understands that the journey away from conformity to this world is not easy. We will be walking along a "*road full of branches and stones.*" These represent the many hardships, challenges, and storms that we will encounter along the way. "*Little by little*" one step at a time it will become easier to continue down the path honoring our own voice.

As we reflect on our individual journeys during this Season of Lent and remember Christ's journey into our humanity, Mary Oliver's words speak to us. The path to discovering the strength of our own voice is never easy. Like Christ's experience in the wilderness, there are subversive voices along the way that are subtle and crafty, telling enough half-truths to trip us up, making us believe we're not good enough, or worse yet, thinking we are too good, that we are above it all, like God. Then there are the subversive voices of our culture insisting every appetite we have needs to be satisfied, every desire fulfilled, if we can do something, we should do it, and, the greatest deception of all, we never have enough.

C.S. Lewis, in his theological satire, The Screwtape Letters, offers insight into the power of the subversive serpents that are alive and well today. The book is a series of letters from a senior demon Screwtape to his nephew and junior tempter Wormwood, which provides guidance in securing the damnation of a British man through half-truths, rationalizations, and heightened pettiness.

Sadly, too often the subversive noise around us drowns out the voice of the One to whom we belong; the One who created us, who delights in our uniqueness, and who gives us each a voice for the journey that is ours. When we find ourselves in the wilderness, with empty stomachs and subversive serpents slithering in our subconscious that would compromise our character, let us remember we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Jesus' strong, clear voice in the wilderness honors the limitations he embraced when he joined us in our humanity. It is an interesting irony how accepting our limitations, recognizing we can't do or have it all, frees us to be better human beings, more honest and authentic, able to hear and understand the voices and struggles of others, because we know our own.

On each of our journeys toward Holy Week; may we recognize and resist the subversive voices in our midst and cry out of the depths to the One who hears and honors our voice, may we embrace our humanity and heed the limitations that expand and enlarge our life experience, and may we seek the presence of the One in whom there is steadfast love and the power to redeem. Amen.