

To Eat or Not to Eat

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

CWZepp, BWCOB, March 13, 2011

About two weeks ago, I was out shopping for a new shower (if you haven't heard or read it in the paper we are in the middle of an addition / renovation project at our house) and we had the whole family along, which is always an adventure with two preschoolers. As we are walking out to our car after our second of three planned stops, we were at the bargaining phase with Shylah and Tristan – “If you guys can hold on while mommy and papa look at just *one more store*, we'll stop and get you guys ice cream cones on the way home, ok?” That seemed to do the trick, and bought us a little more time. So we got the kids buckled in and leave the parking lot, and are about halfway to the final store when Tristan starts screaming bloody murder. What sounds at first to be incoherent gibberish starts sounding a whole lot like “We lost it! We lost it! We lost it!”

I keep driving for a bit and Amanda tries to comfort him from the passenger seat. But he will not be consoled. And so Amanda and I are trying to figure out what is going on – did he drop his sippy cup? or did he leave a toy back at the store? – and suddenly it hits me – my planner! I look down, and sure enough, my planner is not there beside me. I had carried it out of the store, put it on the roof of our car when I buckled Tristan into his car seat, and driven off with it sitting up there by the luggage rack. And Tristan had apparently watched it fall off the roof beside his window while we were driving.

Now you've probably seen my previous planner – the black one with brown edges. For over ten years it had been my companion in life and ministry, and I kept just about everything in it – my calendar, contact info, receipts for expenses to be reimbursed, notes from meetings, a few months worth of pastoral time and contact records, to do lists, and of course, the notes I had just made about the showers and other things we had looked at on the shopping trip which was why I had carried it into the store in the first place. Once we realized what had happened we went back to look for it – much to the chagrin of our ice cream anticipating children – but to no avail. It was gone. And though I am still holding out hope that one day here before too long some stranger will call to tell me they found my planner in a ditch somewhere in Harrisonburg, I have been forced to move on.

So over the past few weeks I have been going through the painstaking process of rebuilding my calendar along with everything else that I lost. For a time I really enjoyed telling people who asked me whether I was available for this or that “I don't know, my calendar is clear!” But that got old pretty quick. Thus, I have been occupying myself recently with that favorite pastime of going through various group and event calendars, old e-mails, notices, flyers, etc etc and trying to restore as much as I can of my calendar. And along with reminding me of what I was supposed to be doing yesterday, doing this all at once rather than gradually as it typically happens has taught me one very important lesson: My planner is a tool of Satan!

To illustrate, allow me to share just a few of the entries that have recently been added to my fresh planner calendar:

- Tuesday, March 1 – Pizza Party meal for HARTS hosted by that Agape Class
- Saturday, March 5 – Wedding Planning over lunch at Cally's

- Tuesday March 8 – Shrove Tuesday pancake meals to benefit Bridgewater Home Auxiliary
- Tuesday, March 8 (and the second Tuesday of every month) – Buy pizza from Papa John’s to benefit the Jr. High Youth
- Sunday, March 13 – overstock Girl Scout Cookies for sale at church
- Sunday, March 13 – Sr. High Youth out to dinner
- Tuesday, March 15 – Peace Feast at Linville Creek COB sponsored by Pastors for Peace in the Shenandoah District.
- Friday, March 18 – Tristan’s Birthday Party and Dinner
- March 20 – April 3 – Schedule individual meals with 4 youth from the Youth Inquirers Class.
- Saturday, March 26 – Dick Shreckhise retirement dinner at Lancaster Church of the Brethren
- Sunday, March 27 – Jr. High Youth Fundraiser at Cici’s Pizza.
- Sunday, April 3 – Krispy Kreme Doughnuts to benefit the Jr. High Youth delivered

Now, of course, this is not an exhaustive list of calendar entries. But have you noticed a common theme? And what if I told you that one of my goals in this new year was to eat more responsibly and shed a few extra pounds? Yes, I am convinced that my planner calendar is indeed a tool of the devil, what with all its food and meal related entries. In fact, I am coming to believe that there is an evil conspiracy going on around me. Why else would the themes of nearly every event I am putting in my planner center on food and eating. Vacation Bible School? “The Shake it Up Café” “Where kids explore the Bible as a cookbook filled with God’s recipes for life. Annual Conference? “Extending Jesus’ Table” with a primary text featuring a miracle of multiplying food.

Have you ever noticed that when you are on a diet, all the world is a doughnut? Or that everywhere you go, someone is offering up freshly baked cookies?

I have had pretty much a life-long problem with my weight. From my adolescent ballooning with several long stints on prednisone to treat asthma and allergies to the freshman 15 and then some, from stress eating while attending seminary and also working full time to the vocational hazards of too many pizza parties, I cannot remember a time in my life when I was not consciously overweight. Periodically, I have had short periods of successful weight loss through disciplined dieting and exercise. And I have learned enough about myself and my metabolism to know what foods trigger and/or curb my appetite, and what I need to do to maintain or lose weight.

The problem is, I don’t always do it. In fact, I very often do not do it. It always starts with something insignificant. After all, what harm is one little cookie going to do? And then I start rationalizing why its really not that big of a deal, then I start not even paying attention to what I am eating, and before I know it, I’ve started gaining weight again.

Now, I am guessing that I am not alone in this kind of experience. And as I look at the lectionary texts for this Sunday, I am struck by the fact that two of them feature food temptations. In Genesis, we’ve got the familiar story of the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We all know how that ended. And in Matthew, we have the tale of Jesus’ three temptations in the

wilderness, the first of which was to use his power to make some food for himself. Now we could spend all day talking about whether these stories represent historical events or are mythic in nature, whether they actually happened or whether they are metaphorical stories which tell us something about our human nature. Or whether it is really accurate to call the forbidden fruit of Genesis a temptation when according to the story the first humans lacked the capacity to discern good and evil prior to eating said fruit.

But today, instead of analyzing these stories for such details, I want us to simply look at them as stories and ask just one question: How did Jesus do what we so often cannot? What was different for Jesus? Why was he able to resist the temptations he faced while Eve and Adam and so many of the rest of us fail?

Because we all have our forbidden fruit, do we not? That which we know we should not eat, or do, or whatever, but for whatever reason or reasons, tempts us and often causes us to fail?

What was different for Jesus?

The easy and obvious answer is to say that Jesus was God and we are not. And so Jesus was able to resist every temptation and remain sinless, while the rest of us, as children of Adam and Eve, suffer from the frailty of the human condition in all its original sinfulness.

But somehow that answer seems like a cop-out. It is the theological equivalent of throwing in the towel, an admission that as human beings, we cannot possibly resist temptation and that it is inevitable that we fail. We have entire theologies built around just such a premise, founded upon the assertion that humanity exists in a state of “utter depravity” and that only divine intervention can save us from our sordid state of affairs.

Perhaps I am being prideful, but that just doesn't cut it for me. Sure, there seems to be a fundamental weakness in our human condition that predisposes us to screw up. More often than not, we take the forbidden fruit, we eat it, and then we feel bad about it. But then when it comes around again, we eat it again. And the cycle seems bound to repeat itself.

But there is something within me that intuitively cries out that it doesn't have to be that way. There is something inside me that says that even though human beings have a long and storied history of giving in to temptation – of eating forbidden fruit – we still have the capacity to change. We can be better than our temptations. Just because I have always struggled with my weight does not mean that I always will. And I believe that this story of Jesus resisting temptation in the wilderness holds a key to figuring all that out. Not that Jesus can do the work of defeating our sinful nature for us or save us from facing the temptations of life. But that Jesus here gives us a clue as to how it can be done. Perhaps he shows us the way, if we will follow him.

Which is what Lent is all about isn't it? Following Jesus? Is that not why we spend 40 days each year in Lenten observance, remembering the 40 days and nights Jesus spent in the wilderness? And why is that, do you think?

This is one of the reasons I really appreciated Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the Matthew text in *The Message*. Listen again to the first few lines:

Next Jesus was taken into the wild by the Spirit for the Test. The Devil was ready to give it. Jesus prepared for the Test by fasting forty days and forty nights.

Jesus prepared for the Test.

How often do we prepare to be tempted? How often do we invest significant portions of our time and energy to developing the capacities and skills to resist temptation? How often do we deny ourselves, how often do we fast, so that we have the clarity of mind and spirit to know what is really important?

Notice that the devil shows up in this story at the end of the 40 days and nights. Not at the beginning, not throughout, but after Jesus had taken the time to prepare. Does that mean that Jesus did not face temptation during those 40 days? We don't know. But that misses the point doesn't it? The point is that when this series of temptations came, Jesus was well prepared. By the time the devil shows up on the scene, Jesus was practiced in denying himself, disciplined in his purpose, and knew full well what was coming.

I know that when I have had success in weight loss it has been because I was well prepared, focused, and intentional about my food choices. When I have failed, it has been because I am distracted, careless, and haphazard in my eating.

And the same is true for my spiritual life. When I am intentional in practicing spiritual disciplines like meditation, journaling, or keeping solitude and silence, my spirit bears witness in a sense of wholeness, purpose, and contentment. But when I neglect such disciplines – when I move day by day, week by week, without giving the attention or focus my spiritual life requires – I see the evidence as I am more irritable, quicker to anger, and less focused and purposeful. And I am also much more likely to yield to temptations of various stripes, whether they be in the form of a doughnut or a quick fix for a complex problem. And ironically enough, losing my calendar and planner has served as a pretty good wake-up call to me in reminding me of what I prioritize in my life, of where I place my intentional efforts and energy.

Too often, we treat our spiritual lives like we are cramming the night before an exam. And more often than not, the result is that we are familiar enough with the material to recognize what we should know, but haven't put in the time or effort to master it. In short, we are ill-prepared. And so when temptations come, we know what we should and shouldn't do, but we haven't prepared well enough to know how to do it.

Which is one of the reasons that we have Lent. It gives us an annual opportunity to follow Jesus into the wilderness again; to invest intentionally in our spiritual lives; to deny something of ourselves in order to gain something of God; to practice spiritual disciplines; to prepare ourselves anew for the journey of discipleship, a journey which Jesus said would require us to take up a cross of our own to follow him.

And then when temptations come, we might have the strength of spirit to discern that it isn't a question of "to eat or not to eat", but rather a question of what to eat?. If we are well prepared, and have followed Jesus not only into the waters of baptism but also into the wilderness of Lent, we will be able to resist the forbidden fruit, having had our hunger satisfied by the Bread of Life.

May it be so for us in this season of Lent.