

Lent: Spring Training For Christians

Gen 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Rom 5:12-19; Mt 4:1-11

Responsive Reading: Psalm 32

John Ewing Roberts, shares in Remembering and Forgetting: “When I was a boy, I was told, ‘Baptists don’t do Lent.’ No one knew why. I suspect that it was an anti-Catholic thing which I pray we are over. It was the old argument, ‘whatever they do, we don’t!’ which is a curiously convoluted, twisted and unhealthy way to decide on religious practices.”

John Roberts continues, “Whatever the reason for ‘not doing Lent,’ I think it is a great loss for any Christian not to prepare for Good Friday and Easter. Every spring baseball players prepare for the season with spring training; every spring ordinary people prepare for summer by doing ‘spring cleaning.’” And some prepare for gardening by purchasing seeds & starting plants.

So why shouldn’t Christians prepare for the most important events in Jesus’ ministry – what he did for us on Good Friday and Easter Sunday, what he did for us on Golgotha’s cross and at the empty tomb? If it helps you, think of Lent as a kind of Christian spring training, with spring cleaning and spring gardening mixed in.

It’s time for another Lenten season. As usual, the Lectionary guide starts us off with a focus on temptation. Trespass and transgression are the central words in our scriptures today. Of course, when we talk about enticements, appeals, and attractions, we know they can lead us into wrong doing, hurting others, self sabotage and disappointing our Creator.

So we constantly need to be reminded about the **deceitfulness and deadliness** of sin. One of the largest freshwater turtles is the alligator snapping turtle. Found primarily in southeastern United States, these massive turtles have been known to weigh close to 250 pounds. They are carnivore-ous, and while their diet is primarily fish, they have been

known to eat almost anything else they can find in the water, even in a few cases small alligators! It can be very aggressive but often the alligator snapping turtle relies on a uniquely deceitful method of foraging for fish.

The turtle will lie completely still on the floor of a lake or river with its mouth wide open. At the end of the turtle’s tongue is a small, pink, worm-shaped appendage. The turtle wiggles the end of its tongue so that it looks like a worm moving through the water. When a fish comes to eat the worm, the turtle’s jaws rapidly close, trapping the fish so that it cannot escape.

Similarly to the snapping turtle’s lure, temptation comes in the guise of something desirable, it lures us and always carries destruction with it. If we could see the end result rather than the tempting part, sin would be easier to resist. But Satan knows this, so he cleverly disguises what is deadly in the guise of something pleasurable. In short - temptations deceive and kill us.

At its core, temptations are distractions luring us away from who God created us to be and from what God calls us to uniquely do in this world. Temptations expose our vulnerabilities. And they can be an opportunity for strengthening our awareness of areas that need growth in our lives, cultivating spiritual disciplines that train our hearts and minds into new habits. Acknowledging our reliance on the Holy Spirit and each other, helps us in our times of temptation.

In 1986, Gordon MacDonald, a man I admire, for was the president of Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. He was asked the question: “If Satan were to blow you out of the water how do you think he would do it?”

Mr. MacDonald said, “I’m not sure I know, all sorts of ways, I suppose; but I know there’s one way he wouldn’t get me. He’d never get me in the area of my personal relationships with my family. That’s one place where I have no doubt I’m strong as you can get.”

Within two years of making that statement, this admirable & respectable Christian leader was a broken man. He committed adultery against his wife and nearly lost everything he had.

Satan, who is called the tempter in the Bible, (Mt 4:3; I Thess 3:5), is out to get us. The devil does not care how spiritual we are, or how secure we are in our Christian homes or how much ministry we do; this evil spirit is going to tempt us to trespass, hoping to lead us away from Jesus, our families and friends, and our witness for Jesus.

John Piper says that any sin, “gets its power by persuading me to believe that I will be more happy if I follow it. The power of all lures and temptations is the prospect that it will make me happier.” And often, it’s the little stuff, like just eating an apple, where we start drifting away from the Almighty and each other.

What settings are you in when you fall? Avoid them. What props do you have that support your sin? Eliminate them. What people are you usually with when you are tempted? Avoid them. What is the mood you are in that leads you into dangerous decisions? Recognize and fight them. Benjamin Franklin said, “It is easier to suppress the first desire than to satisfy all that follow it.” Plus, we should add, when we flee temptation, let’s don’t leave a forwarding address. The thing that makes humans & rivers crooked, is following the line of least resistance.

The famous preacher Charles Spurgeon said, “There are two equally damning lies Satan wants us to believe: First, just once won't hurt. Second, Now that you have ruined your life, you are beyond God's use, and might as well enjoy sinning. So learn to say no. It will be of more use to you than to be able to read Latin.”

It is easier to suppress the first desire than to satisfy all that follow it. John Newton the slave trader explained. ”Satan will seldom come to a Christian with a gross temptation. A green log and a candle may be safely left together. But a

few shavings, some small sticks and then a few medium size sticks, and then larger, and you may bring the green log to ashes.” The devil is always testing our character.

In China's later Han era, there lived a politician called Yang Zhen, a man known for his upright character. After he was made a provincial governor, one of his earlier patrons, Wang Mi, paid him an unexpected visit. As they talked over old times, Wang Mi brought out a large gold cup and presented it to Yang Zhen. Yang Zhen refused to accept it, but Wang Mi persisted, saying, "There is no one here tonight but you and me, so no one will know."

"You say that no one will know," Yang Zhen replied, "but that is not true. Heaven will know, and you and I will know too."

Wang Mi was ashamed, and backed down. Subsequently Yang Zhen's integrity won increasing recognition, and he rose to a high post in the central government.

Human nature is weak, and we tend to yield to temptation when we think nobody can see us. In fact, if there was no police force, I think many people would not hesitate to steal. This is not to say that when we do something bad, we feel no compunction at all, just that we are weak and prone to yield to temptation. But even if nobody witnesses our sins, and not a soul knows of them, we cannot hide the truth from the eyes of our conscience. In the end, what is important is not that other people know, but that we ourselves know and of course our Creator knows.

And a benefit of handling temptation well, a person who sins neither in thought, nor deed, and is fair & just, gains enormous courage, strength, and freedom. As witnesses for Jesus, we need courage born of integrity in order to be capable as powerful followers. To achieve this courage, we must search our hearts and make sure that our conscience is clear and our behavior is beyond reproach and pleasing to the Almighty. This gives us the freedom to be

fully followers of Jesus, without the burden of guilt and fear of being caught for something we are hiding. We have a lot less stress if we don't feel we have to hide ourselves from others.

So what spring training, spring cleaning and spring planting do we need to do? **First** we need to accept that life is a test of our character. In a sense we are all like Job. Satan wants to test us, and weaken God's power and fame through us. So we need to practice those things that give us a solid base for our character. The Bible says: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walks about, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

Character involves the restrictions & restraints we impose on our own behavior as we seek to be faithful to God. We will not steal in order to get ahead, because the Bible says, "You shall not steal." We will not condone discrimination or bigotry or exploitation of any kind, because the Bible says, "You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself." We will not engage in adultery or any other form of illicit sexual activity in order to satisfy some burning, lustful passion within us because the Bible speaks against such conduct no matter how "good" it may feel or how "satisfying" it may seem.

The devil wants to test us at the level of our weaknesses and hungering for the pleasures of this world, because she wants to find out what kind of people we are. It is an attitude test.

There isn't a single moment that Satan is not by our side, exploiting all kinds of people and things to entice and tempt us, trying to get us to sink into disaster and evil. Everyday life brings us frequent encounters with temptations – even if only in our attitudes and minds. So we need the habits of the power of prayer, soaking in the Bible, worship and what ever works for you to draw ourselves closer to Jesus and to fellow believers, to protect ourselves.

The Second point is - we need to accept that Satan is powerful & temptation is real. Why do

we think the Bible spends so many verses and stories and teachings about trespasses and sins?

Third, let's rejoice that God is more powerful. We are provided ways to fight temptation. The Bible is a reality book. It's definitely more real than reality TV. We can rely of God's power to help us. For example, Eph. 6, (10-11) urges us, "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes."

And we are told that God's power involves forgiving us when we fall into trespasses and sins. The Almighty has the best trump card in the world. I John 1:9 tells us: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins & to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Psalm 103:10-14 teaches: "He has not punished us as we deserve for all our sins, for his mercy toward those who fear & honor him is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth."

Fourth, we need to accept that we are in a war – a spiritual war. I know talk about spiritual warfare can get some people suspicious and upset, but whatever we think, it's real. What I'm talking about here is that we need to be careful we don't down play the reality of sin and temptation. Or find ways to deceive ourselves. So often it's when we relax too much and forget that temptation is a process, and never ending, that we get lazy doing our spring training.

Fifth, we need to do more than just be careful and defensive – focusing on "do not's." The Bible urges to participate in preventative measures. Spring training is growing positive measures, in traits like the fruits of the spirit. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law." (Galatians 5:22-23)

So let's take proactive measures on our characters with spring training, cleaning and

gardening preparation. Let's grow our maturity and faith.

Temptation is seldom a one time event. Ball players and followers of Jesus can develop bad habits, and find ourselves, slowly veering from the straight and narrow. That's why spring training is needed. To clean up bad habits. To get into shape. To stay in shape. To better our shape so we as plants grow and offer fruit.

So let's predetermine in our minds what we will & won't do in situations. Just like ball players work out regularly, to grow muscle memory for all kinds of situations, let's do spring training this Lenten season, on our hearts & attitudes, so we are better able to please & honor a holy God. Let's open ourselves up so the Almighty can clean us up, train up into His traits and plant our Creator's character in us more and more.