

Appetite for Destruction

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

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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February 26, 2023/First Sunday of Lent

We've arrived at the first Sunday of Lent, this forty-day season of the Christian calendar where we journey with Jesus to the cross of Calvary and the empty tomb of Easter.

This season, we are using worship resources prepared by our sisters and brothers from churches in Mennonite British Columbia (and maybe a few from outside BC).

The Lenten theme they chose was: **Created in the Image of God, Shaped by Jesus.**

It's a good theme for Lent. It expresses two vital truths.

1. God's divine image rests on and within each human being, regardless of physical or mental ability, regardless of whether we acknowledge this or understand it or not.
2. Something has gone wrong. This divine image is no longer expressed in its truest form automatically or easily in humans this side of Genesis 3 (which we'll get to). We need to be shaped and reshaped by Jesus over the course of our lifetimes.

How?

Here I want to quote our worship resources for this first Sunday of Lent, where our texts are about testing:

Lent is a season of testing... The 40 days of Lent correspond to Jesus' 40 days of testing in the wilderness. Two questions lie at the heart of our testing: What do we really want? Who are we?...

Testing reveals our inner essence, the alignment of our souls—what, beyond everything else, makes us tick. Lent is a time to reflect on our appetites and desires.

So, let's do that, shall we? Scary, thought it might seem. Let's reflect on our appetites and desires.

Late Thursday afternoon, approximately one minute before Joani wanted to send the bulletin off to the printers, I still didn't have a sermon title (shocker!).

I scanned the texts again quickly, rummaged around in my brain for catchy cultural references, and landed, of course, on rock and roll.

Appetite for Destruction.

This is the name of one the biggest rock albums of all time. Its songs are still blared out in hockey arenas and sports stadiums decades later. It was by Guns N' Roses, a band that I do not recommend in any way. They are vulgar and crude and not even remotely admirable.

But Lent is a season for confession. So, I'll confess that I absolutely loved this album as a teenager. I had an appetite for aggressive music.

Back to the title. *Appetite for Destruction*. It oozes all kinds of rebellious rock and roll attitude, doesn't it?

It glories in throwing off the shackles of constraint and inhibition and propriety, and just doing all the things people say are bad for you. Play by your own rules. Do what feels good.

It's a pretty great title for a rock album. But the title expresses a deep and not so great truth about the human condition.

Our appetites very often *do* lead to destruction.

Nearly every way in which a human being can destroy their life or the lives of those around them is due to an undisciplined appetite being given free reign.

An appetite for food, when unrestrained, can lead to becoming physically and mentally unhealthy in all kinds of ways.

An appetite for money, when unrestrained, can lead to lives of clutching and grabbing and stepping over others to make it to the top.

An appetite for recognition and status when unrestrained, can lead to narcissistic selfishness and, in its most extreme form, violence of all kinds.

An appetite for sex, when unrestrained, can lead to all kinds of trouble from treating casually that which God designed to be serious and sacred, to infidelity, to addictions to pornography, and ultimately to sexual abuse. And from these things come all kinds of highly destructive breakdowns of relationships and families, and the incalculable suffering of children.

An appetite for entertainment and distraction can lead to addiction to technology, to spending more time in virtual worlds than the real one, to unhealthy dependence on social media for connection (and, as studies are proving more conclusively almost every week, this has led to catastrophic effects upon mental health, particularly for young girls).

An appetite for escape from the troubles and pains of the world can lead to addictions and substance abuse of all kinds. I don't need to tell you that our city and our culture is in a crisis right now when it comes to addictions.

These are just a few of the more obvious examples. Nearly every good thing in this world can be and is abused when appetites are not restrained.

I see this in graphic detail every Monday at the jail, where nearly every story is characterized by addiction and lack of impulse control. There's nothing very rock and roll cool about the stories that I hear there.

But we don't need to go to the jail to see people whose appetites are having a destructive influence on themselves and those around them.

We see this all around us. Some of you know the truth of this all too well from your own experiences or the experiences of those close to you.

What do we really want? Well, too often what we want is precisely what is not good for us.

Genesis 3 gives us scripture's first example of an appetite leading to destruction.

Everything is good in the garden. The first humans are given the task of cultivating and working toward the ongoing flourishing of God's good creation.

There is only one restriction: "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will certainly die."

And, for the first time, a human appetite takes hold.

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

With this act of disobedience, sin enters the world.

The first human beings were not content to be image-bearers; they wanted to be "like God" in a way that they were never intended to be.

The appetite was, on one level, for fruit. It looked good. It was pleasing to the eye.

But on a much deeper level, it was appetite to be like God.

But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not 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" (Gen 3:4-5).

The rest of the story of Scripture—the story of humanity, of Israel's rise and fall and struggle, of the sons and daughters of God chasing their appetites down all kinds of destructive roads—spins out from this moment, from this grasping beyond creaturely status, this desire to be like God.

And then we get to Jesus. And Jesus, like the first humans in the garden, is also tested.

Jesus is led out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. There, for forty days, he eats nothing. At the end of these forty days, the devil arrives on the scene to tempt Jesus.

It's a story that echoes important points in broad biblical narrative.

The first hearers of this story would have remembered the serpent saying to Adam and Eve, in Genesis 3: "Go on, choose your own way... God can't be trusted..."

They would have remembered the Israelites' exodus from Egypt.

They would have instantly made the connection between Jesus' forty *days* in the wilderness and Israel's forty *years* in the wilderness, Moses' forty days on the mountain, and even the forty days, and forty nights that Noah spent on the water.

They would have remembered that in each instance, deliverance from evil came after forty days.

The two-fold point would have been clear enough.

Jesus was faithful where Adam and Eve were not, resisting the temptations of the devil where the first humans had given in. He passed the test that they failed.

Jesus was faithful where Israel was not, persevering through the struggle of the wilderness without giving into grumbling and idolatry.

Jesus is the authentic human, doing for Adam and for Israel (representatives of all of humanity) what they could not do.

Jesus shows us that appetites do not exist simply to be indulged. He is showing us that restraint and discipline are part of how we are shaped into authentic human beings who live in proper relationship to God and others.

This is why Lent is often a time where Christians choose to give things up. We seek to discipline our appetites and to anchor ourselves once again in the sufficiency and strength of God.

This week, I came across an article called “How to Quit Just About Anything for Lent (Or Just Because).”¹ A quick scan of the article promised practical advice on how to stop looking at my phone so much, how to swear less, eat less meat, cut out sugar, caffeine, alcohol, and even quit complaining.

I didn’t read the article. I have no doubt that disciplining each of these appetites would be good for me. But I couldn’t get past the byline under the title.

“Voluntarily sacrificing pleasurable things resets your senses and makes you master of yourself.”

This is precisely *not* what Lent is about. Becoming the master of yourself? No! The disciplines of Lent are meant to remind us that God is master, not us.

We see this in the story of Jesus’ temptation. In each of the three tests from the devil, Jesus is offered an opportunity to demonstrate his mastery.

If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread...

If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down...

All this I will give you... all the kingdoms of the world... Just bow down and worship me.

I’m offering you good things—things God would want you to have, things God would want you to do, things the world is desperate for! It’s a good deal.

And in each case, Jesus says: God alone is master.

People do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Do not put the Lord your God to the test.

Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.

¹ https://getpocket.com/collections/how-to-quit-almost-anything?utm_source=pocket-newtab

There are a lot of things going on in the temptation of Jesus in the desert. But at least one of these is that Jesus shows us the way that a human soul can be forged through testing.

In the desert, Jesus says that our appetites must bow to God's will and God's intentions for our lives.

This is an important word for us to hear at the outset of Lent. I am not necessarily saying that you *must* give something up for the next thirty-six days or so, I am not prescribing some regimen of fasting or self-mortification.

These things are between you and God. Only God truly knows the state of our souls and what they need to be shaped like Jesus.

I want to end with Jesus in the desert. Earlier I said that the first hearers of this story would have made the obvious connections between Jesus' forty days in the wilderness and the story of Israel.

I said that Jesus does for humanity what it failed to do in Eden, and for Israel what it failed to do in the wilderness.

The same is true for us. Ultimately, Jesus does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

No amount of heroic self-discipline or retraining our appetites will save us in the end, helpful as these things can be in making us healthier and more Christ-like in life.

Our appetites do lead to destruction and there is huge value in putting them in their proper place.

But they must ultimately be replaced by a stronger and deeper one. An appetite for God. An appetite for Christ and for his kingdom.

One Wednesday night, we had our annual Ash Wednesday service. It's a short service, 35 min or so. A liturgy, some songs, some prayers. The sign of a cross in black ash made on foreheads.

Often, when I do this, I will say, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return.” This year I didn’t do that. This year, I used an alternate phrase that my chaplain supervisor, a Roman Catholic in the Franciscan tradition, recommended.

“Repent and believe in the gospel.”

After the service, Jackie told me that she liked the new one better than the old one. “Because we actually don't return to dust, in the end,” she said. “Not our true selves!”

She’s right. We don’t return to dust. We return to Jesus.

We return to the One who knew no sin and yet became sin for our sake. We return to the one who went out into the desert to do battle with the devil and pass a test that we could never pass.

This is our God. This is the One who holds us. This is the One to whom we will ultimately return.

Secure in his love and emboldened by his example, let us go out into the wilderness of Lent, seeking always to love him more and to follow him more faithfully.

Amen.

