

**On a Mountain in the Desert**  
**March 9, 2014**  
**By Pastor Laura Hehner**

I really don't like talking too much about sin, in church.

Doing it from time to time is a necessary evil, of course....

...because sin is a reality in our spiritual lives,

And an important one to face...

so today we're going to delve into the idea a little bit more than usual...

.. our readings not leaving us with much choice.

But seriously---I just don't like it.

I don't like it because, as I've mentioned on other Sundays,

The word has just been so horribly abused. So misused.

The church has *sinned* in the way it has used the idea of sin.

----That larger social institution, through history, moving away from spiritual truth,

and *guilting* people with the fear of flames and red spandex

into conforming into a more docile and manageable status quo.

The church, over the years, has used the idea of sin

to gain inappropriate sway in the lives of others,

And to maintain force and dominance in places of the human heart they don't belong,

simply for the sake of keeping the fat cats fatter.

And we don't need to think too hard to come up with examples, right?

That's the worst part. No research required.

INDULGENCES. That's the first one I'll throw out there.

(If any of you don't remember, the Catholic church used to SELL the forgiveness of sins to people whom they'd shamed into shelling out enough dough to absolve them of their "guilt.")

Horrible systems of oppression have been maintained and upheld, and strengthened because of the concept of "sin."

Abusive relationships. The oppression of women.

Murderous witch hunts spanning across centuries. The crime of slavery.

And the list keeps scrolling on.

(...One of the reasons we don't see a bunch of young smiles coming in through these doors each week.)

The church is guilty of some of the greatest sins of human history, and a lot of that has to do with this abuse use of the word, "sin."

So... yeah. It makes me uncomfortable to talk about it.

And that's not even to mention that whenever a pastor starts talking about sin...

...shoo! The risk of hypocrisy just shoots through the steeple!

Because, of course, we all mess up all of the time. Not one of us has it all right.

And I never want you to think I've deluded myself into believing I'm any different. Ever.

All of that being said, we're still left today to face it, together.

(Not everything is comfortable to talk or think about.

But we've gotta have the courage to do it, anyway. )

So today, we're digging a little deeper into this idea of sin. Our readings lead us there.

But it's not so much sin on its own, as it is the always-related topic of what?

What happens in both our passage from the gospel and Hebrew Bible, today?

...The most obvious thing, anyway?

...TEMPTATION. Right? ...Youch.

Just in saying the word, I feel like I already started

growing a white wig and bad black hat.

But yes. Temptation is the experience we read of in both of these.

And some pretty powerful, temptation, at that, right?

Wow. From Genesis:

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.

Then from the Gospel of Matthew:

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 him, "All these I will give you,

This isn't just *light* temptation, here.

It isn't that hmmm... you know I'd really like a second piece,

kind of temptation experienced here in our two passages, today...

... but the very worst kind... and that is the type that takes the form

of what we believe might be a way of improving our life. Improving ourselves.

Living more fully into who we are, or want to be,

as a result of accepting the offer in front of our eyes.

It's that really deep, down, all-muddled-up opportunity which at first presents

as the most wonderful, and even most reasonable thing in the world.

...Something that makes sense---too much sense, really---not to at least consider.

And okay, all of this leads back into this word we use... "sin" ... right?

How so? Well... in these two passages, it isn't exactly obvious.

We need to go back to a healthier application of the word sin.

That one where to "sin" isn't necessarily to

commit one action listed amongst bullet points of specifically "bad," actions, right?

As we move further along our spiritual path, we learn that morality is dynamic.

That a single action is rarely any one certain way.

It's more about what's *behind* the action which makes it positive or negative.

(Matthew 15:6-12).

It's that application of sin which tells us we are "missing the mark."

That we have a goal of doing the right thing, take our shot, and miss our target.

It's messing up. Making a mistake with others,

which brings harm to our relationship with them,

And or leads us further from our sense of our closeness to God.

This first way we're tempted into sin comes around a lot more often...

... this sense of sin speaking to the ways we bring harm to the lives of others, or ourselves.

But the second way we're tempted into sin,

applies more to these passages we just read here, today.

And to the reason these passages were chosen for us to look into.

This sense of sin being that which separates us from a sense of our closeness to God.

Because that's exactly what Jesus and what Eve were both, together,

but separately, being tempted to do, right?

The symbol of the serpent in this allegory from Genesis... what does he do?

What does he say to Eve?

He pits her against God, doesn't he?

He turns a simple warning from God into a selfish act on God's part

to keep her and Adam from being as powerful in their knowledge of the world.

The serpent here, makes it sound like God is trying to short her, somehow,

out of what is truly hers to have.

Then she looks at the opportunity in front of her eyes.

She believes what he says,

and that separation between herself and God slowly begins to form...

... eventually causing, in this mythological story of truth,

the ultimate distance between humanity and God,

as she and Adam are cast from paradise.

Then from Matthew. And oh, these are the worst, right?

From the devil. Satan.

Ha-Satahn (in Hebrew), meaning... the SERVANT.

This darkness comes to Jesus right at the start of his ministry while he's fasting and in prayer...

(this is important to remember, so please keep that fact in your minds)...

... in this time that's supposed to be one of the most holy and sacred.

In the middle of this act of DEVOTION...

... the darkness starts creeping into all of that light, right?

And what is Jesus tempted to do?

He's tempted to *sin*, right? In the clearest sense of the term...

...he's tempted to separate himself from his sense of God.

In this passage he's asked to take the power he already has and CLAIM it for himself.

Seems simple enough, doesn't it?

But where's the problem?

In each of these requests, the trickiness of this darkness

isn't in the request itself, but what lies beneath.

Each request is in direct violation of the devoted relationship between Jesus and God.

Doesn't matter if he can or can't do it.

It's not a matter of whether Jesus has the *ability* to do any of these things

he's been tempted to do!

What matters---the underlying RUB, here---is the fact that in doing them,

Jesus would be directly violating the understanding ---

---the intimacy---already established between himself and his God.

Jesus is fasting. So he's starving. He's tempted to make bread and eat.

What's his response? I rely on God.

It's not a question of hunger or his ability to bring bread to his mouth.

It's that subtler question of where his trust truly lies, right?

Then Ha-Satahn comes and says to Jesus, throw yourself off this building.

I know you'll make it, and you do too!

Again... nothing so much in the act itself. But the subtler things beyond the obvious,

Which would again separate Jesus from God, in the doing.

He says, no I won't do it. And he won't do it, because

He knows that it's not the way...

...that mindlessly *testing* God for your own gain

isn't something you do when you're close with God, but distant.

Then, of course, the ultimate... in what seems desperation, at this point,

the "devil" tells Jesus he'll give him anything he wants, as long as he worships \*him\*.

And, of course, Jesus refuses to worship anything but the God of his life.

And unlike Eve who made that choice to follow into the temptation, leading her away

from the closeness of her relationship with God, and is then cast out of paradise,

Jesus is left to stand unharmed,

still by God's side, at the end of these words from Matthew.

Okay... so why are we talking about all of this, today?

Why were we asked to mention all of these awkward words? "Sin, Temptation, the Devil?"

This is our first Sunday of Lent, folks.

This holy season started on Wednesday, with the imposition of the Ashes,  
and will carry us all the way into Easter, now.

This is a time of fasting. Of prayer.

A lot like that time Jesus spent in the desert.

But most importantly... in the meaning behind all of those acts...

...this is a time of being with God.

Of sharing ourselves with God.

Of really doing our best to remember God breathing within us  
through each minute of our lives outside of these forty days we've just entered.

Our prayers and our fasting are just ways for us to more easily sense  
that presence of God that's already naturally all around us,  
but that's sometimes hard to notice, with how distracted we become  
in all of the clutter of our daily mess.

It's a time of [opening doors, and as a result helps us  
to experience the warmth a lot of light...

...but it also creates the opportunity for darkness to start creeping in, too... right?

The temptations we face during lent, are those moments  
which threaten to separate us from that heightened sense of God all around us.

That raw-bones-nature-of-sin... which at its heart isn't this act or that act,  
but simply *any* act which serves to separate us  
from the closeness we share in relationship with God.

So I think the whole point in focusing on these awkward passages this morning,

as we enter into this holy time,

Is to remember this temptation that exists all around us always,

to do something that might move us away from God's side.

They're here to help us stay watchful, and to recognize it more clearly when it comes.

To know that it will come in the form of wonderful things.

Easy things. Acceptable things.

But to be understanding, too, of the fact that it's what lies beneath

an act which makes it into something which will either keep us close by God's side,

or pull us away.

And if it's something that will pull us away,

to be vigilant enough to recognize and stand against it...

...Keeping our minds and hearts always with God as we live through each day,

doing whatever we can to stay as close as possible

to the heart of God while our own still beats.

There's something else to consider here, too, though... before we close up this morning.

I like that the two passages chosen are ones of failure *and* success.

That's what you see here, too, right? (I'm not the only one, I hope)

In our first, is temptation and *failure* to resist.

And in the second, is temptation and *success* in staying close with God through all.

Both are dealing with human flesh.

In the first we have Adam and Eve. People. Man, woman.

In the second, we have Jesus (Yeshua bar-Joseph---

---just to help us remember how human he actually was).

To religious scholars, this Jesus is known as the “Second Adam.”

(Not sure if you’ve ever heard those words applied to Christ.)

And theologians call him this,

because Jesus took that fall from Grace spoken of in Genesis,  
and lifted us back up to stand straight and breathe deep.

---As the Redeemer of our lives, he made things right again,  
after we screwed up so badly and got it so wrong at the start.

And I like that they did this, because to me

it just shouts of the ways we *will* stumble, and fall, and stand again.

It shouts to me of second chances. Of the hope we have *always* in God.

See... during Lent... we’re gonna screw up.

It’s definitely far more likely we’ll mess up than that we’ll do it just right.

And if we don’t, maybe we didn’t choose a tough enough fast.

Maybe we need to challenge ourselves just a little more.

Screwing up is inevitable. SIN is inevitable. We’re humans.

So we’re imperfect by nature.

But what’s also inevitable is the constant love of God...

...The fact of God’s life being always wrapped around us,

like the arms of a loved one in a moment real meaning.

So when we screw up, there's no point in whipping ourselves. Tormenting ourselves.

---throwing it all to the wind and giving up.

...This itself can be a form of sin, because in this sense of *guilt*,

we'll a lot of times isolate ourselves from our sense of *God*, out of shame.

And it's that created *distance* which is the sin.

So yes, *when* we screw up, it's important for us

to remember that we are constantly renewed in God.

That God's love is eternal and always.

And that if any one force in this universe has the power to forgive us,

it's the Holy Life of God.

...After all, God happens to *literally* be the most understanding force of existence in all eternity.

...So... don't beat yourself up too much. Stay close to God.

And remember, that in the middle of these fasts and these prayers,

we might be standing on top of a mountain in the desert,

But God will never leave us high and dry.

Our bible tells us that God wants to be close. God won't ever push away.

...No matter how many times you mess up. No matter how many times you sin,

God seeks always to keep us close.

So I wish you some beautiful moments in your time with God as we enter into these 40 days.

Let them be for you a time of renewal, and of closeness.

A time of sharing yourself with God.

---Your flaws, your gifts, your love.

Let it be open, let it be free,

and be sure to stay near to that Life which loves you, and draws you in,

no matter what tries to lead you away.

Amen.