

In his memoir called *House of Prayer No. 2*, writer Mark Richard describes his life as a boy with a physical infirmity growing up in Virginia. He includes a vignette about the temptation common to most adolescent boys – infirmity or not - growing up in the 1970’s – the search for, shall we say, contraband magazines. These were the days before the Internet.

“There had long been rumors of Playboys in the closet behind Miss Cutchins’s desk. One afternoon when Miss Cutchins is resting on the sunporch, and you are resting out there, not quietly, you screw up your courage and open the closet door, but all you find are years of your town’s telephone books and Mrs. Cutchins’s plastic rain bonnet.

When you confide to your friend about your unsuccessful attempt to find a Playboy magazine, he tells you the solution is simple: all you have to do is go down behind the bus station behind the real estate guy’s office and steal one. The long afternoon you stand across from the bus station on your crutches you learn an important lesson: there are many great protection against temptation, and cowardice is one of the best.”

Well, today is the first Sunday in Lent and we’ve just prayed for God to come quickly to us who are assaulted by temptation. And surely, cowardice is one of the ways that he delivers us. And other times, God uses fatigue or apathy or just plain old age.

This morning I want to preach on the less banal temptation that we read about in our account from Genesis. I’m not saying that the usual suspects in terms of temptation – those of the wine, women and song variety -can’t lead you toward a bad end. Just look at Charlie Sheen. (One parishioner was worried that we were going to make him give up Charlie Sheen for Lent; I assured him that we would not enforce such draconian measures. We all have our limits after all.)

These sorts of temptations remind me of the minister who preached a temperance sermon. With great emphasis he said, 'If I had all the beer in the world, I'd take it and pour it into the river.' With even greater emphasis he said, 'If I had all the jaded women in the world, I'd take them and throw them

in the river.’ And then finally, shaking his fist in the air, he said, ‘And if I had all the whiskey in the world, I’d take it and pour it into the river.’

The sermon complete, the minister sat down. The worship leader then stood very cautiously and announced with a smile, ‘For our closing hymn, let us sing Hymn #365, ‘Shall We Gather at the River.’

Characteristically, preachers like to thunder on about the sins of the flesh, but you probably remember that in Dante’s *Inferno*, the poet places the obvious sins of the flesh – lust, gluttony, and greed – in the outermost circles of hell. He reserves the inner circles of despair and wretchedness for the sins of the spirit – wrath, treachery, and fraud, sins that are summed up in the word *pride*.

The word “pride” doesn’t really mean being proud of one’s children or proud of your basketball team. The way the Bible understands the word pride is more in line with “I will do things my way, I know what is best for me, I will set my own rules and be the captain of my own ship.” This kind of thinking is extremely dangerous territory. As we read in Proverbs 16, “*Pride goeth before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.*”

And this kind of fall – what in theological terms is called “The Fall” – is what we see happening in our Genesis reading this morning. Adam and Eve are living in the Garden of Eden; everything they could need or want is provided. God gives only one prohibitive command – do not eat of the fruit of a certain tree. “*In the day you eat of it,*” God says, “*you shall die.*” The serpent, the great tempter of humanity, completely contradicts God, telling the woman that if she eats of the fruit she “*will not die*”, but instead “*will be like God.*” So the woman, reached out her hand, clutched the fruit, gave some to her husband, and they both ate.

What we call “the Fall” – the fall from paradise, the fall into a life and world of sin and death – is really a misnomer, I think. The deepest ill represented in our Genesis story is temptation to believe the serpent’s words – that we “*will be like God.*” Instead of a fall, it is a grasping for something higher, symbolized in Eve’s reaching up for the fruit. We see not a Fall, but a desire for a kind of spiritual ascendancy.

This is the essence of pride – being like God. God is the one who gives the Law, God is the one who is in control, God is the one who gives and

takes away, God is the one who is the true captain of our ship. I believe that Adam and Eve were happy before they ate the fruit because they lived in a creaturely dependence on God and did not worry about their lives.

When you start “being like God”, when you start making your own Laws, when you start taking control, when you put yourself at the helm of your own life, well, you shall surely die, because no one can do God’s job and live. I mean, how is being like God really working for you?

On Ash Wednesday I preached about what to give up for Lent. The answer is “everything!” Don’t give up one little thing like chocolate or beer and think that you getting at anything real. To get to the inner circles of the sin of “being like God”, we are called to give up on the entire project of living our lives according to our own terms, grasping for control with “grabbing hands (that) grab all they can, all for themselves, after all” as Depeche Mode sings. That is the way of death, death for others and death for yourself.

Let’s just stop for a minute. Let’s just say that you repent of your desire to be like God and control your own life, or your spouse’s life, or your children’s lives. Let’s just say you do give it all up, right here and right now. How do you feel? Probably some relief, like an enormous weight is lifted off your shoulders. Yes, even that situation you are thinking about – especially that situation – just slips away and you feel lighter. You might even feel like crying. In the end, you have to agree, it’s no fun being like God.

What else do you feel? Right on the heels of the delicious relief, you might begin to feel some worry or fear. If you don’t take care of that situation, who will? If you don’t look after this thing, it just won’t get done. That is true to the serpent’s form – always telling you that it’s all up to you, since you are like God. If you don’t grab life, clutch what is there in front of you for the taking, then you will die an impotent death, having lead a useless life. Carpe’ Diem, after all!!!

I’d like to give you a picture to help you think about a life of giving up control, giving up clutching and grabbing. It comes from Robert Capon, one of my theological heroes. The temptation is to think that giving up is a “*doing nothing at all, a profound quietism, a deadly, boring wait for death.... But, I want you to hold out your right hand, palm up, and imagine*

that someone is placing, one after another, all sorts of good gifts in it. Make the good things whatever you like – M & M's, weekends in Acapulco, winning the lottery, falling in love, having perfect children, being wise, talented, good-looking and humble besides – anything.

But now consider. There are two ways your hand can respond to those things. It can respond to them and try to clutch, to hold onto the single good that is in it at any given moment – thus closing itself to all other possible goods; or it can simply lie there perpetually open to all goods in the comings and goings of their dance.”

Adam and Eve clutched their hands around the fruit. Jesus Christ, who being in His very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, opened both hands to receive the nails that would bind him to a cross. He went to the cross to undo the serpent's lie. He gave up everything, so you and I would no longer have to strive to be like God. Instead we can live like we were meant to live - like children with open hands, waiting to receive all that God sees fit to give us, both the good and the bad.

So. Back to you, as after this sermon, and confession and communion, will head back out into your life, into the so- called “real world.” Wouldn't it be nice to not be like God? Let us pray. *“Almighty God, come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations, and as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

Amen.