

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-13

Beyond Four

A sermon preached by
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Texts:

Matthew 4:1-11
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-13

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Lent 1



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2:15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.

16 And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; **17** but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

3:1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" **2** The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; **3** but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.' " **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; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. **7** Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. **8** They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

9 But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" **10** He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."

11 He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" **12** The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." **13** Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate."

Matthew 4:1-11

1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3 The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4 But he answered, "It is written, "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" 5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you,' and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" 7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 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, if you will fall down and worship me." 10 Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" 11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.



“[T]he world happens twice; once when we see it as it is; second it legends itself deep, the way it is.”

So writes the poet, William Stafford. The world happens twice. There are two different layers to what happens around us. One is what we see, the other is the way it really is.

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I was driving through Trenton, NJ one afternoon on my way back from the state law library headed home to Princeton where we were living while I was in seminary. As I pulled to a stop at a traffic light, I looked up the hill to my right. There was a man walking down the hill – he wore raggedy clothes and had an overgrown, dirty-white beard. He obviously had no place to live, or maybe he had a bed in a shelter or a run-down rooming house somewhere. He was probably hungry.

I watched him as he made his way down the hill. And I saw him guiding himself with his hand along the wall. “Must have had a bad night,” I thought to myself. But then I realized that his guiding hand had a purpose. I saw an old cane in his hand – and I suddenly realized that he was not able to see. He used the wall as his guide knowing that when he got to the end, the street corner would not be far away.

Like the good, Christian person my mom and dad was raised me to be, I stopped my car, got out, and asked him if he needed assistance crossing the street. He said he did. So I waited with him until the light turned green. He took my arm, and we crossed safely. I made sure he had his bearings and shook his hand. I offered him a dollar for a cup of coffee to take the chill off. He said “Thanks – my daughter is coming to pick me up soon.” I crossed the street again, got in my car, and drove away smiling knowing that I had done the right thing – do to others as you would have them do to you.

I’m not sure what it was about that man or that day. But even now, 20-plus years later, I still remember him. In the passing years I have been in contact with plenty of people who are homeless and hungry, people that most of society will pass right by – but this one man sticks out in my memory as clear as if it were yesterday.

But ... the fact of the matter is that that’s the way I would *like* to see the story. It’s the first of the ways that Stafford suggests the world happens – what we “see it” as. The reality of that little story

is much different. The way it “really is” – the second way the world happens – is that I stared at that old man for a few seconds until my light turned green, I let the clutch out, turned right, shifted into second, and climbed the hill. I turned up the radio and never looked in my rear view mirror.

I have no idea who that man was, what his name was, if he really was without a home, or whether or not he required any assistance at all. But I do know that I have not been able to get him out of my memory. He keeps popping back up – even as I sat to work on this sermon about illusion and focus.

Because it seems to me that that vision of what I would have liked to have done, what I thought I should have done, what I was always taught was the appropriate response, was merely an illusion. It didn’t happen. And it never has happened. How many times since then have I walked past a person sitting over a steam vent in Center City and not even thought twice about him or her? How many times have I driven past an old man walking along some road barely able to lift his feet off the ground? How many times have I said, “No, not today” to someone standing outside the mini-mart at a gas station or outside a McDonald’s as I go in to order a cheeseburger – asking for a quarter or fifty cents?

“Not today”? That’s an illusion. Why can’t I just say, “No, I’m not going to give you money because I don’t believe you are really going to use it for food?”

South American author, Gabriel Garcia Marquez once wrote about how others review his writings, “A critic sees what a critic wants to see.” The same is true of most of us as well. We see what we want to see – we don’t often see what’s actually there but only what we want to see.

But God wants us to see the reality all around us. What God would rather have us do is focus beyond the illusions that we live

until we finally get into focus what it is that she would have us do and be.

The Adam and Eve story from Genesis says as much about illusion as it does about anything else. There we are – you and me – hanging out in the Garden of Eden where everything is just fine and dandy. Until one day, we begin to think that there must be more to life than just frolicking among the fig trees. I don’t know how we got the idea that there was something better than that paradise, but we did.

The serpent, “more crafty than any other wild animal,” convinced Eve that the way to get to the better stuff was to take a piece of fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden. “You’re not gonna die,” the serpent says, “You’re gonna be just like God. You’re finally gonna get to know good and evil after you eat this fruit.”

So Eve believes her. And Eve calls Adam in and he buys the story as well. They pluck fruit from the tree, eat it, and suddenly we find ourselves no longer frolicking among the fig trees, but using the leaves from the trees for clothes to cover up our nakedness. So who won’t see? God?

It’s such a wonderful story because it’s about illusion. Who does Adam blame when God asks him if he has eaten from the tree? Adam says to God, “The woman whom *YOU* gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” Listen closely to the blaming. “The woman *YOU* gave to be with me.” God is the one that gets blamed.

Next God turns to Eve. “What is this that you have done?” And Eve’s not going to take the fall either. “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.” Remember the beginning of the story, the serpent is “more crafty than any other animal that ... *GOD* had made.” Eve might as well have said, “The serpent *YOU* gave us tricked me.”

So there we are in the Garden of Eden where reality once existed and we're pointing our fingers at God. "YOU did it, God. Not us." We created in the Garden the ultimate illusion, and we've lived with it ever since. When anything goes wrong with our lives or with the world, we're so quick to blame God. We buy into the illusion that we set up so nicely for ourselves from the very beginning, that God is so involved in every intricate detail of life that if anything goes wrong it's God's fault.

A young woman dies from cancer and leaves behind a family. Where was God? A plane crashes and a hundred people die. Why would God do that? A child is born addicted to drugs. Why would God let that happen? Hungry and homeless people walk our streets. Why did God create people like that?

It's all an illusion. We see what we want to see. We would rather blame God than take ownership of what happens on this world. Yet the truth is, God is only God. We're the ones living and breathing on this world where all of these things happen. God is not to blame for every little or big thing that happens.

And what Jesus is doing out there in his wilderness with the devil is trying to eliminate that illusion and get himself as well as us to a clearer focus in our lives. Each time the devil throws an offer in front of him, Jesus is tempted to let the illusion become his reality. "God will let you turn stones into bread," "God will stop you from crashing to the ground if you dive off the pinnacle of the temple," "God won't mind if you take the kingdoms of the world for yourself." Illusions. And Jesus is sorely tempted. Wouldn't you be?

But yet he pulls himself together and focuses beyond the illusion that the devil has set in front of him. And he reminds himself – and us – that we "live ... by every word that comes from the mouth of God," that we are not to "put ... God to the test," that we are to "worship ... God, and serve only [God]."

That's the reality – that's the focus – that God calls us to look for beyond the illusion. God is God. God is not an excuse, God is not a scapegoat, God is not simply there for us to pass the buck to. And if we're willing to live the illusion that what we do makes no difference because God always has the final decision then we're not living as God intends.

The movie "Patch Adams" is about a young man in Virginia by the name of Hunter Adams who discovers that he just doesn't fit in anywhere. He admits himself to a psychiatric hospital so he can pull himself together and it was there that he began to develop the theory that laughter can be an important part of the healing process and from that foundation he goes on to medical school and then founds the Gesundheit Institute.

As Adams is being shown around the psychiatric hospital, an orderly takes him to the activities room. An older man pops into the picture from nowhere and sticks his face right in front of Adams and the orderly, "How many fingers do you see?" Adams and the orderly are startled. "Stop sneaking up on me!," yells the orderly. "How many?," insists the older man. "Four," says Adams. "Four? Four? You're an idiot," says the man as he walks away shaking his head. "You're gonna love it here," the orderly snickers at Adams.

Sometime later, the white-haired man is walking around the activities room in his bathrobe with his four fingers in the air shouting, "Four? Four? Four? You're all insane!!"

"Who is that guy?," Adams asks. The orderly replies, "Arthur Mendelson. He was one of the most innovative minds of our time. Look at him now, he can't even count the windows."

One evening, Hunter Adams makes his way to Mendelson's room and finds the old man working an intricate mathematical problem at his desk. Mendelson's paper coffee cup is slowly

leaking from a seam and smearing the ink on his paper, which he ignores.

“The fingers,” asks Adams, “What’s the answer?”

“Oh, you’re another one of those bright young fellows who always knows the right answer. Welcome to real life,” Mendelson says with bitterness in his tone as he brushes aside the curious visitor. Adams picks up the coffee cup, takes a piece of tape off the edge of the desk, and fixes the leak by putting the tape on the split seam. Mendelson looks at him with surprise at this ingenious patch.

He holds up Adams hand between the two of them, in front of Adams face, with four fingers in the air. “How many do you see?”

“There are four fingers in front of me,” Adams says.

“No, no, no, no. Look at me. You’re focusing on the problem. You focus on the problem you can’t see the solution. Never focus on the problem. Look at me! How many do you see?”

Adams obviously still sees only four fingers. “No. Look beyond the fingers! How many do you see?”

Adams stares at the fingers and then past the fingers and at Mendelson’s face until the fingers are blurred and the face is more clear in the background. Miraculously, the blurred fingers double. “Eight,” Adams says.

“Eight! Eight! Yes, yes, eight’s a good answer,” says Mendelson, “You have to see what no one else sees. You have to see what everyone else chooses not to see – whether out of fear or conformity or laziness. You see the whole world anew, each day. And the truth is, you’re well on the way. If you didn’t see

something here besides a crazy, bitter old man, you wouldn’t have come in the first place.

“What do you see when you look at me, Arthur?” Adams asks.

“You fixed my cup. I’ll see you around ‘Patch.’”

You have to see beyond the four fingers in front of your face. You have to see beyond the problem to find the solution. Once you focus beyond the illusion, you find the solution.

And that’s what Jesus was getting at in the wilderness. If he were to focus only on the problem, the offers from the devil, he would have seen only the four fingers in front of his nose. If he were to accept as reality the illusion we set up in the guise of Adam and Eve that God is to blame for all that happens, he would have failed the test and bought into the devil’s offer. But instead he had to force himself to blur the obvious and focus on what was beyond his nose in order to focus on God.

The question for us as this Lenten season begins is can we find focus beyond the illusion that’s in front of our nose. We are tempted to put the blame on God, to buy into the illusion that God knows all, sees all, controls all. And when we do that, we focus on the four fingers at the tip of our nose.

I come back now to that old man that I saw shuffling down that Trenton street on that afternoon 12 years ago. I know that the reason that it keeps surfacing for me is that I feel guilty that I didn’t do anything for that man. And I suppose over the years I’ve pointed a lot of blame to excuse my guilt feelings. I’ve blamed myself, but mostly I’ve blamed God. “Why didn’t you make me stop? Why did you put us there on that same corner at the same time? Why doesn’t somebody help people like him? Why are there poor people in the world? God, why don’t YOU do something about it?”

But here I am today realizing that I have to look past that illusion – look beyond the four fingers – and accept what God is willing to so freely give me. Because, you see, the focus that God calls us to is not something that costs us anything. It's a gift from God, a gift that Jesus was able to recognize out there in the wilderness and on into the rest of his life and death.

You see, it's not some effort that any one of us can make that will get us to focus beyond the illusion. We could stare forever at the four fingers in front of us and nothing would happen. It's only when God pulls our focus beyond the illusion that we have set up for ourselves that we can finally know who God is and where God is in each of our lives.

I invite you this morning to begin Lent with a commitment to follow Jesus lead and re-focus your journey. We enter into the wilderness today on this 1st Sunday of Lent and we have in front of us the One who remained focused in the wilderness. While in our wilderness, let us look at those four fingers that he holds in front of our eyes – no, look beyond those four fingers – and see all eight that are really there. Beyond the four you will see the solution. And the solution is right here in this re-focusing season where God meets us if we're willing to allow it to happen.

Amen.