

BECOMING HUMAN
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Humans are made; not born. Other animals are born complete. Other animals are natural born Buddhists, perfectly content to be what they are, fully present in the here and the now. Fears yes; but no dread of the future or shame for being less than they could be.

Humans are anything but content. Ever since Eve reached for the forbidden fruit our reach has exceeded our grasp. Thank God for evolution. And thank God for that serpent in the Garden of Eden that lured Eve to release her curiosity, to become something more than other animals.

That mythic folk tale from the Great Ancestor is a profound insight—not even the gods can stop us from reaching for the stars. Like other animals we have cravings. Unlike other animals we have insatiable longings.

As Bono, U2's lead singer put it:

*I have climbed highest mountains
I have run through fields
I have run, I have crawled
I have scaled the city walls
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for
I have kissed honey lips
Felt the healing in her fingertips
I have spoken with the tongue of angels
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for*

Like other animals we have cravings. Unlike other animals, we have insatiable longings. Only humans have the burden of freedom to make something of themselves. We become human by making choices.

And that brings us to the first lesson for today (Deuteronomy 26:1-11).

The Hebrew people had been slaves for 400 years in Egypt. And then Moses liberated them. They had no idea what it meant to be human, to live in freedom.

And so during 40 years in the wilderness Moses taught them how to become human, how to make wholesome and holy choices. And one lesson he taught is this: there's more to life than satisfying your primal hunger. Humans can't live on bread alone. Humans must learn much, including how to be grateful for the gifts of mother earth. We mustn't just take. We must return a portion.

When you have come into the land that your God is giving you as an inheritance and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that your God will choose as a dwelling. And there you shall offer your gift.

Humans aren't born. Humans are made through making choices. We have god-

like powers, powers to create and destroy like no other species on this planet. How will we use them?

And that brings us to the gospel lesson for today (Luke 4:1-13).

It too, like the Garden of Eden, is mythic. It may not be factual; but it is a true revelation of the human predicament, of our potential and pitfalls.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit — not unlike each of us — was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. By the way, thank God for the devil in you; for it's out of darkness that light is born. As Paul Simon put it: Hello, darkness, my old friend, I've come to talk with you again.

Jesus ate nothing during those 40 days and he was famished. Then the devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

Jesus answered, "It is written, man does not live by bread alone."

Then the devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and said, "To you I will give their glory, their wealth and all authority. If you will worship me, it will all be yours." Which is to say, if you bow before greed, if you submit to greed, it will all be yours.

Jesus answered, "It is written, Worship and serve only God."

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, God will command the angels to protect you and on their hands they will bear you up, so you will not dash your foot against a stone." That's from Psalm 91, which only goes to show: the devil can quote the Bible.

Jesus answered, "It is also written, Do not put the Lord your God to the test." When the devil had finished every test, he departed until an opportune time. Which is to say, the devil's got our number.

Each of the three temptations break down to one thing: *Jesus, look out for yourself.* And that is a temptation that persons, nations, and our entire species face time and time again. It's the temptation to put ourselves ahead of others and above the world.

Feed your hunger any way you can. Turn stones into bread. Deplete the oceans. Poison the soil. Blow the tops off mountains. Feed your hunger. And then satisfy your lust for more and more any way you can. And then get god on your side, a god who saves you in the end.

It's ironic and tragic that the ultimate concern for many Christians is to be saved. It was a temptation Jesus rejected.

Selfishness is not becoming a human being.

So how do we become human?

The gospel lesson for today ends at verse 13, in the wilderness. But the journey doesn't end there.

Jesus left the wilderness and returned to his hometown. He went to the synagogue and because he was a rabbi, he was extended the courtesy of reading

the Scripture. He was handed the ancient scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He took it and unrolled it and unrolled it and kept unrolling it the way we must unroll our own inherited tradition until we find the secret to becoming human.

Jesus and unrolled the scroll and found the place where it says:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
The Spirit has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

And that's how we become human. We serve the God of love by serving others, which is to say, by practicing compassion in the way and in the spirit of Jesus. And that's why we sing over and over: *I want Jesus to walk with me.*

It's not magic. It's love.