

“Words and the Word,” Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 & Matthew 4:1-11; 2/10/08; Albany UMC

Those of us who watch TV know that television programs have changed over the years. I am not an expert on this; but you will agree with me on this—it seems that TV channels have more and more reality shows now than before. Nowadays people like something real, something dramatic, something you can engage in, and something you as ordinary people can identify with better. So they want to put in the programs people from the real world rather than professional actors.

For example, my children like to watch “America’s Funniest Videos”; the program I like is-- I don’t even know the name of it—the one in which many chefs come in two teams and compete each other for money. But probably some of the most popular reality shows that I remember are: “*Survivor*” or “*American Idol*.” What do they do in those programs? They go through all kinds of competitions and the winners get a million dollars. The other day I saw a program called *Millionaire Matchmaker* in which a group of women come in and compete to date a millionaire man. It is just crazy that people come on air and compete each other to find a date, isn’t that amazing?

I guess this is what American media tell us and that’s where people’s interests are; people want to be millionaires; people want to be famous; and people want to get married to those people. That is the message we hear in our daily lives; that is what people dream; and we are told that that is a life of success in this day and age. We wake up every morning and we go to bed with a flood of words for those lives.

But this morning on this first Sunday in Lent we get this counter-cultural message from Jesus.

He says, “No, no, no... what you are to listen to is not the *words* (plural) the world say to you day and night but the *Word* which God gives you.” The text says the world will lift up your name on high and honor you if you know how to turn these stones to loaves of bread.

Don’t ever try to test God for your own desires.

“Don’t you become an American Idol to be worshiped by America,” Jesus says, “but you worship your God and serve Him only.”

The fascinating facts I find in the text are:

First, even Jesus, the son of God, was tempted. That gives us some sort of comfort; this means that it is not abnormal for us to go through many temptations in our lives.

Second, wherever the Spirit leads you, the devil also follows you. See the verse 1 of chapter 4: “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” That is very interesting sentence. It has two parts: one is “Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness;” and the second part is “he was tempted by the devil.” That is strange! If the Spirit was the one who led Jesus into the desert, why didn’t he stay there to protect him from the devil? Or why did God let the devil be there to begin with? That is a little puzzling question, isn’t it?

But I appreciate the fact that this text really tells us about the reality of our lives. It is like both sides of the coin; every time we try to be a good and faithful servant of God the devil gives us a second thought right there.

But the text makes it clear that we need to stick with God’s words. We need to trust God even when it is hard.

The Genesis story also gives us a similar story.

We church goers have heard the Genesis story a million times; our tradition says that the text is about how we human beings have fallen; theologians say that it tells about how we became who we are as sinners. That is not only the beginning of the Bible; it is also where we start when we talk about the Gospel. It is just a powerful story.

In the story, the Satan seems to have all the secrets for you to become smart and wise. While Adam and Eve enjoy all the privileges of being with God, they also face with the reality of temptation. While God is talking with Adam the devil is overhearing the conversation.

Scholars don’t agree when and where this Genesis story was written. But they agree that this story gave at least one explanation to a group of Israelites who complained about the hardships sometime in their life journey somewhere in the wilderness. “It shouldn’t be this hard to feed a family. It shouldn’t be this hard to have a family. Someone, somewhere must have done something wrong. It wasn’t us. It must have been our ancestors.”

But this Genesis story is not all bad. This story gave the people of Israel a glimpse of paradise too. (The Pastor's Bible Study, Vol III, 95. Abingdon Press, 2006)

When I read this story over and over last week, I also heard a very positive and affirming message. First of all, I was very amazed to see how God wanted to trust and work with human beings.

In the verse 15 of the chapter 2, after finishing the work of creation, we see God give Adam a master key saying "Hey, son, I want you to be in charge of all this!" And then in the verse 19, God gives him the authority to name all the creatures on the earth; it says "whatever the man called a living creature that became its name."

What a privilege the humans have been given! Let's say, a school is named after you; how about a small street is named after someone in your family; how about a national holiday bearing your name like Martin Luther King Jr. birthday! Isn't that a great honor?

But here God is giving this great privilege to Adam which means "human beings," that means you and I are included. The bottom line is that God has a great trust in us even when we do not trust in ourselves.

Can you picture the people of Israel listening to this story while they were in the wilderness? I think this is a fascinating story. I am sure they also heard all kinds of words of temptation, all sorts of reality show type of stories.

But this Genesis story really must have given them a chance to hear the Word, the Word of God.

Especially, if you read chapter 1 of Genesis, there is nothing but excitement and happiness on the part of God as the creation process proceeds; God just exclaims: verse 18 says "God saw it was good"; verse 21 says "God saw it was good"; verse 25 says "God saw it was good"; verse 31 says "Behold, it was very good."

Of course we know that this is only the beginning part of the Genesis story. The following story doesn't sound good at all.

Human beings did not follow God's command; we disobeyed; we follow the words our bodies tell us rather than the Word God tells us. As a result, the world has become the way it is.

We have broken our covenant with God; we are nothing but sinners; as Paul says, there is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away (Rom 3:9). That's why all these reality shows become more popular and popular.

But I still believe that God has not given up on us. God knows us; God knows what kind of world we live in; God even knows our challenges and difficulties. That's why God sent us Jesus Christ. Jesus died on the cross to wash away our sins and restore our weaknesses.

But at the same time, God gives us a power through His Spirit to overcome all the words of temptation in this world.

During this Lent, let us try to maneuver through all the noises of the world, be it political or commercial or any other, and focus ourselves on the Word. It is the Word of God, not anything else that brings us to the real life of success. Amen.