

Sunday February 26, 2023
First Sunday in Lent
Who Will I Listen To?
Genesis 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7
Rev. Karen R. Stunkel

When I was in the sixth grade I learned about temptation. my learning about temptation had nothing to do with that first year of middle school. Although I must admit that the eighth-grade boys did look more appealing than the sixth-grade boys. Or that I was beginning a three-year confirmation class at church. I had already read the entirety of holy scriptures three times. Although I'm uncertain if I would have passed a bible content exam. I learned about temptation from the big walk-in closet on the second floor of our home.

I learned about temptation from my mother. My mother and I were close. She was my go-to person. She had all the answers for life, at least within my mind. She instructed me about friendship and family and faith. She prayed with me. She taught me the best ways to clean, make a bed, cook a meal. She worked outside the home, and some nights my dad and I would cook the meals for the family when he arrived home from work. She was amazing. In my sixth-grade mind she was perfect in every way. I looked up to her. We were very close. When I read about God walking in the garden in the evening with Adam and Eve and how close they were to God, I believed that I was that close to my mom.

So, about the closet. On the second floor of our home was a big walk-in closet. For the longest time it was just a door. It didn't hold my attention or interest. I walked by that door for years. I vacuumed the floor in front of the door and dusted the panels on the door. And in my mind, it was just a door. Until October 25th. October 25th was the birthday of my oldest brother and youngest sister. My mother left the table after dinner, as I was clearing the dishes. The cake was ready to cut after we sang happy birthday. My mother had not yet returned. In the pause before dessert, I headed for the bathroom on the second floor. And there was my mother coming out of the closet with gifts. Gifts for my brother and sister. Beautifully wrapped gifts. I must have startled her. What I heard her say to me was, "whatever you do, do not go in this closet." She said it with the voice, like I might

imagine the voice of God saying to Adam and Eve, “You may eat of any of the trees in the garden, except the tree of knowledge of good and evil.”

For a while the closet continued to be just a door. Thanksgiving came and went and along with it the frenzy of decorating and shopping for Christmas and my birthday. Despite the mandate of my mother, I sensed a growing curiosity about what was in the walk-in closet. I found myself standing between the words of my mother and my own curiosity. I began setting up arguments for why it would be ok to go into the closet. I wasn't sleeping. And when I was sleeping, I was dreaming about the closet. About a week before my birthday, I created this opportunity to look in the closet. I excused myself from the dinner table and went upstairs to use the bathroom. Instead, I went to the closet, my heart pounding. I put my hand on the knob and my mother called up the stairs, “Karen, what are you doing up there?” I tiptoed and leaped to the bathroom and shut the door. “I'll be right down,” I replied. I gave the toilet a flush and ran back downstairs. My heart pounding and face flushed. I was certain I was busted.

I became obsessed with the closet. I wasn't studying or praying. I was sulking and sullen, irritable, and unfocused. Instead of listening to the voice of my mother, I found myself listening to this roar of voices that all wanted me to open the door and step inside. Instead of praying or talking to my mother about my struggle. I went into the closet. I found my birthday gifts and I knew about everyone's Christmas gifts. I gave into temptation. I felt terrible. See, I had envisioned it would be like standing on the top of the world. I would have all this knowledge. I even believed that somehow I could exert power over my siblings. Instead, it was the worst Christmas ever. There was no surprise. There was no joy in me. And my mother saw my deep sadness. She asked if I was ok, and I could only nod no.

Years later I said to her, “You know I went into the closet.” She said, “Yes, I know.” I said, “I saw everything.” And she said, “Yes, I saw your pain.” I said, “I wish I had never done it.” And she said, “I love you and I forgive you.”

When I was in the sixth grade I learned about temptation. I learned that my mother loved me enough to let me fail. And when I failed, she would still love me. Over time, I learned there are voices to be trusted. And there are voices to be

ignored. And perhaps the greatest lesson is temptation has been with us since the beginning of time. Adam and Eve could not resist the voice of the tempter. Jesus in the wilderness resisted the voice of the tempter. And the tempter went away. The tempter is always present. The tempter returned when Jesus was in the garden the night before his arrest and ultimately his crucifixion. Jesus resisted and that makes all the difference.