"Guide Our Feet"

Luke 4:1-13

Julie R. Harley – Feb. 21, 2010 (First Sunday of Lent)
First United Church of Oak Park

What if Adam and Eve had said no?

What if they had looked at the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and simply said, "No thank you," to the serpent?

Think of the consequences. There would be no change of address after the Garden of Eden. We would still be living in bliss.

No dry cleaning to pick up – ever. No time clocks, no tax forms, no 401Ks. No more waiting for a two-week vacation. No Lamaze classes, no epidural injections.

All of this could have been avoided . . . if only Adam and Eve had looked at the serpent holding the apple and said, "No thanks, I'm full."

The Eastern Orthodox Church teaches that God gave Adam and Eve the whole word to be food. To eat, to be alive, to be in communion with God – it was all one and the same thing. There was no separation. No mine and yours, only ours.

Eve and Adam's fatal flaw was this: they were not satisfied with all the fruits on all the trees in the Garden. There was still one tree that God had set aside, specifically saying, "Do not eat from this. There is a limit to your freedom. Hands off this one."

Though they had everything they needed, they wanted more. They chose to eat "apart" from God, ignoring the limits God had set. They acted independently (after being lured by the serpent), thinking they might keep this their little secret. Perhaps they hoped that they could be like God themselves, have a life apart from God.

Instead of honoring God, they chose to gratify themselves. And that changed everything.

In today's text, Jesus confronts the temptations of Satan – in the stark landscape of wilderness -- the anti-Eden. The whole story is Adam and Eve in reverse. Adam and Eve had everything, yet wanted more. Jesus had nothing, yet he said "no" to all the lures of the devil.

Jesus in the wilderness hits the "Reset" button on the story of the Fall.

Jesus replays the struggles of Adam and Eve and then changes the ending.

A member of my spiritual guidance group said in this story Jesus faces the devil and says, "Satan, you can kiss my ass."

"I know who sent me here: it was God and the Holy Spirit."

"I know why I'm here: to bring forgiveness and abundant life."

"I know what I'm called to do: Trust God fully, serve God completely, and stand up against you and others like you who are trying to unseat God."

In the battle with temptation, Jesus wins. This is a muscular, macho Jesus. This is Jesus as played by Clint Eastwood.

But Jesus' testing was not over once and for all. Our text ends with a cliffhanger: "The devil retreated temporarily, lying in wait for another opportunity." (Luke 4:13, in "The Message" version)

To be human is to be tempted. No matter how far we evolve, new temptations arise. As theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said, "There is a new peril of evil on every new level of the good."

Automobiles brought us great freedom and mobility, but they created an economy dependent upon foreign oil. Labor-saving devices made our lives simpler and saved us time, but also contributed to obesity. The internet gives us unparalleled access to communication and information, but also makes pornography easy to find. We have incredible health care options available, but the costs consume 20 percent of our GNP. We have the luxury of inexpensive air travel, but airplanes provide a perfect venue for terrorist attacks.

What is it that makes us so susceptible to the temptations that surround us?

- All of us have inner hungers – for food, money, control, fame – things that we believe will make us feel complete. Jesus HAD God and was fully connected to God, so he didn't need those stand-ins or substitutes.
- Temptation plays upon our sense of self-worth. We believe that our value is dependent upon the things around us – clothes, travel, prestigious positions, houses, boats, arm candy. Jesus knew that his self-worth was dependent only on trusting God and serving God's purposes.
- Temptation lures us to go our own way rather than honoring our commitments to God and others. Think of the choices made by Gov. Mark Sanford, Sen. John Edwards, and golfer Tiger Woods. Rather than honoring their spouses, they chose self-gratification. Jesus knew that he would have no personal gratification <u>unless</u> he honored God.
- Martin Luther said we all face temptation, but he also believed we have a moral obligation to stand up against it. "You can't help it if a bird flies over your head, but you don't need to let it make a nest in your hair."

So how did Jesus resist temptation? He said "no" to things that did not fulfill his mission.

Jesus is truly hungry after 40 days of fasting, and the devil tempts him to turn a stone into bread, so that he can eat, and perhaps feed everyone who is hungry through his miraculous power.

Jesus says, "No." He knows for sure that his mission is about creating <u>spiritual</u> hunger, not satisfying physical hunger.

Jesus is still a poor, obscure peasant, and the devil tempts him to become a great king.

Jesus says, "No." He knows for sure that his mission is about pointing to God's power, not enlarging his own.

Jesus still has no community, no followers, and the devil tempts him to have control over all the earth.

Jesus says, "No." He knows for sure that his charisma will form a community based on poverty, not impressive stunts.

This is the very reason we have Lent. Let is a time for us to get clear about our spiritual purpose – so we can stand strong in the face of evil and temptation.

It was only in the 4th century that it became legal to be a Christian. By that time, people decided there was no conflict between being Christian and being comfortable. They blended in with the atheists, pagans and agnostics, and breathed a sigh of relief that their faith would not necessarily lead to jail time or crucifixion. People got a little ho-hum about their faith.

Eventually they realized it was time to stop being so lackadaisical, stop taking their faith for granted. So church leaders expanded the three day fast, which used to begin on Good Friday and last through Easter Sunday. They counted back 40 days (minus the Sundays) to begin the church season of Lent on Ash Wednesday. People often think this is a Roman Catholic tradition, but even John Calvin 500 years ago commended fasting to Presbyterians. He said it will subdue needless desires of the flesh, prepare us for prayer and meditation, and show humility before God in confession.

Lent is a time when we remember our dependence on God. Lent is a season of spiritual self-discipline that prepares us to be more courageous in mission.

It is God who guides our feet, not the devil. It is God who allows us to live a life that is not merely adequate, but exceptional.

And in the season of Lent 2010 we are asking God to guide our feet in global mission. Inspired by Jesus, let's learn to say "no."

What if we said "no" to the temptation to build up our own nation at the expense of others' welfare? What if we said "no" to our own comfort, so that we could make a greater commitment to trusting God and serving others?

All of us can do something for God's global mission -- depending upon our life circumstances.

Everyone can make a contribution (even if it is only a few coins) to our One Great Hour of Sharing offering which will be collected next Sunday.

Everyone can begin praying for another country of the world every day during Lent.

Our church leaders can support God's mission by renewing our covenant of support for the Middle East Task Force of the Chicago Presbytery. Our elders can renew our commitment to Congregations in Solidarity with Latin America.

Many of us can read about Greg Mortenson and the mission of the Central Asia Institute in Afghanistan – to build peace with books and not bombs. We finished our review of "Three Cups of Tea" and will be meeting March 15 to discuss Mortenson's second book "Stones into Schools." Perhaps we have something to learn from his work to build schools and promote education as a means of stopping the Taliban and creating opportunities for self-determination among the people of these war-torn countries.

You could participate in adult education on Sunday mornings, focusing on global mission in Colombia, Latin America, and the Middle East.

Our congregation can support an overture to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA asking the U.S. government to suspend seven U.S. military bases placed in Colombia, South America last year. The U.S. military presence makes Colombia's neighbors nervous about their motives and plans for the future. The Presbyterian Church in Colombia has asked us to pray and act for thousands of displaced people who have been removed from their homes to make way for big business developments. We have the power to make a difference, through our support for Mamie Broadhurst and Richard Williams' mission work in Colombia and through our actions here.

Some of us can guide our feet to attend Ecumenical Advocacy Days in Washington, DC, March 19-22. Rev. Leah Fowler is organizing youth and adults to travel as a group to speak to our legislators and learn more about global justice issues. Some of us can commit ourselves to take part in a mission trip to Colombia in July.

Guide our feet, God. Guide our feet in global mission. Guide our feet as we seek to pray and work for the healing of the nations.

How would the world be different today if Adam and Eve had just said no?

God has given us the power through Jesus Christ to change the end of the story. Amen.