

Problem: Human beings many times think we are God.

-Last week, in honor of the recent death of actor Bill Paxton, Abby and I watched the film *Titanic*. I remember being fascinated with the story of Titanic as a child history buff and seeing this story on film was really amazing. Now, 20 years later, I still am impressed with how director James Cameron wove all of these complicated historical stories together to produce one narrative of excitement, hope, and tragedy. One of the more famous titles of this ship was, of course, the “ship that is unsinkable”, It was a symbol of human’s trust and reach for new innovation and technology that would “bring people a better life.”

-One of the biggest ironies and lessons from the story of Titanic, I think, is learning the learning of a simple fact: we are not God. Technology and the advancement of ideas cannot be confused with being God. For when we try to be God, as we did when we thought we could build the biggest ship in the world and claim it “unsinkable”, we are always proven wrong in one way or another and sometimes people and parts of creation die.

-At the beginning of the season of Lent, we are given two important stories today which both, in their own way, focus on the temptation to *be God*. Jesus in the wilderness tempted by Satan as well as Adam and Eve tempted by the serpent to eat from the Tree of Knowledge.

-Jesus is at a weak point, starving, and seeking stability. Perhaps he is letting this “Son of God” thing go to his head. Satan seems to strategically know Jesus’ human vulnerabilities because each temptation starts with a well placed “if”. “If you are the Son of God.” In my mind, this is an incredibly powerful way to use this term and might have Jesus thinking: “What if I am not?” “What if I am not strong enough?” “What if I am not good enough?” You don’t have to be Jesus Christ in order for “if” to get underneath your skin. “If you are a good pastor, you should do.....” “if you are a good wife/husband/son/daughter, you need to do” “If you are _____, you should do” We see this not only personally, but also nationally and internationally. “If you are the greatest country in the world, you need to do.....” Sound familiar? The “if” statement can be a powerful way to undermine someone’s credibility and inflict maximum doubt within themselves as to their being a child of God. It also can sow seeds of great yearning to be something we are not. “If you are like God, you need to”

-This is the case in the Adam and Eve story. This story isn’t about the “sinful woman” or the “devil snake” (in fact there is no devil mentioned in this story. All that is mentioned is the “crafty temptor”.)

-It’s also not about Adam and Eve wanting to know Good and Evil as ethical discernment or rational choices. What this story is about rather is “the desire to make ourselves the arbiters of good and evil: the creators of good and evil.

“But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

(Genesis 2:4-5) Adam and Eve desired to assume for themselves the role of God.”

-There was a man named Frank whom I met at the San Francisco Interfaith Council when I was interning there who was a recovering drug addict and dealer. At the time he was caught, he had an incredible network of street dealers who all reported to him in the Tenderloin neighborhood of San Francisco. He was a true entrepreneur who was very smart and streetwise. He was in charge of the Men’s Winter Shelter with the Interfaith Council which works in a very similar way to our own Family Promise here in Missoula: rotating around different churches in San Francisco helping about 100 men each night. I asked Frank how he got involved with the shelter and he said: “once I figured out it was a pretty dead end thing to have a street drug business, I felt I needed to fill that void somehow.” It was true, Frank was a master at coordinating churches for this shelter which grew in capacity and volunteers every year. It turned into an entrepreneurship and passion for him and it was incredible to watch.

- I think Frank’s story is an inspiring one when it comes to temptation. For centuries, the church has taught its followers that “being like God is wrong. So don’t be like God.” Simple.

-The problem is that whether we like it or not, we are created with voids and holes. We are created to strive, succeed, and never give up. So the lesson for me here is not “stop having this desire/hole in yourself.” But instead, ask ourselves: what are we going to fill that hole with? Are you going to build a street-corner drug empire or are you going to build a vast network of homeless shelters whose goal is to house anyone who needs shelter for the night? Are you striving to “be God” in controlling the world or are you going strive to “be like God” in loving and honoring the world? That’s the choice we need to make: it’s two sides of the same coin.

-As the Titanic began to plunge into the Atlantic, the movie masterfully shows the ship’s string quartet: Wallace Hartley, Roger Bricoux, George Krins, and Theodore Brailey playing the hymn “Nearer my God to Thee”. It was one of the most emotional parts of the entire film and served as a wake-up call to many onboard: our goal is not *be* God, but *be near* God.

-Lent is a time of repentance - turning our hearts and minds to God and a rethinking of how to be nearer to God. It’s not, as many have seen it, a season of shame, guilt, doom and gloom. How can we reclaim repentance which pulls us closer to God and get rid of the fear and shame which separate us from God and one another?

-What are we going to fill the voids in ourselves with? May you begin this Lenten journey with taking stock of yourself and gain a clearer vision of growing a little closer to God remembering that we will never be God. Amen.

