

# Human: Being and Becoming

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Psalm 32  
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7  
Matthew 4:1-11

*Reflection Question: What has been an experience of challenge in your life, perhaps one that tested your faith? How did this challenge help you experience God in a new way?*

As we have heard, our theme for Lent this year is “Becoming human.” It seems so simple since that is what we all are — human. And yet this season we want to try and understand what it means for us to be human, and what it meant for Jesus to be human. In Genesis we read that people are created in the image of God. So then what does it really mean to be human?

It certainly is not easy to be human. We see that right away in the story of Adam and Eve. We are told that Adam and Eve didn’t get it right, and ever since we have all struggled.

It should be easy for Adam and Eve. They have everything they want in the garden. They don’t even have to share it with anybody — except the animals and each other. The serpent lures Eve and Adam into thinking that they should want fruit from one more tree. They should want not only to be created in the image of God, but to be like God, to have the same knowledge as God, the knowledge of good and evil.

What is the knowledge of good and evil? The ability to discern good from evil in morally ambiguous situations? Or the ability to control good and evil? Or the ability to stay above the fray of either good or evil and watch it all from a knowledgeable perch? The earthquake and tsunami in Japan — that should be an easy call. But is it good or

evil that the United States already had an aircraft carrier in Japanese waters? Would we call a no fly zone over Libya, good or evil? Would we call it good or evil that the Marriage Equality bill did not come up for a vote this week in Maryland?

For Eve and Adam, the fruit represents not only an awareness of such dilemmas, but the advent of these problems. Eating the fruit from that tree changes everything. Now Eve and Adam are aware of their own bodies in a new way; they learn shame. And though they remain created in God's image, now they are ashamed of their bodies and see the need to cover them, at least those parts that are different from each other.

The banner for Lent this year offers us human images. It is an accomplishment on many levels. Sara Person spent hours on the technical aspects of the banner: finding and choosing faces, enlarging the pictures, adjusting the colors and shadows and that was only the beginning. Once the banner was prepared, people from the congregation chose passages from the gospels, and wrote in seven different languages to create the faces and the relief around the faces.

These faces represent all of humanity: old and young, alive and long dead, various cultures and races. There is a child with Down syndrome, a soldier missing a limb, a young woman in her yearbook photo, a man from 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine. All of these are human, and all are created in the image of God.

Technically, this is an astounding and beautiful feat. But equally amazing to me was the process of writing the words of Jesus, slowly, onto the canvas. The level of concentration needed, even though I knew well the texts I chose, drew me into the words in a new way. The Word was becoming flesh before my very eyes; the words

were creating flesh. I became aware that people, who are created in the image of God, are composed of and by the Word of God.

Over two different days I worked on the face of a young girl. From close up, as I wrote stories of Jesus interacting with uppity women, I could hardly recognize it as a face. It took more than one spunky woman story to finish the image. As I got to the end of the third story, the words of Jesus were written right into her mouth, on her lips. Jesus was calling the synagogue officials hypocrites, out of the side of her mouth. What a strange power and synchronicity I felt with the story.

As I wrote the words of Jesus they became mine. I told my own story to the others who were gathered to write. Jesus' indignation with the synagogue officials became my own indignation with church officials. The Word made flesh entered my flesh — and came out of my mouth perhaps in more colorful language than is befitting a pastor.

This graphically illustrates that God is not a static image. God is more verb than noun, so said feminist theologian Mary Daly and Irish poet John O'Donohue. Perhaps this is what the serpent is driving at with those first two humans. Eve and Adam are not limited to being beautiful bodies in the garden; they have choices, they can take action. They can be like God. They too can be verbs.

And yet it is the Word made flesh, that very active Jesus, that does not take action when tempted in the wilderness. The irony of it all. Eve and Adam have all they can possibly want in the garden: plenty to eat, companionship with each other and God, nothing to trouble their pretty little heads. It is all theirs and yet almost immediately they reach for even more, taking what is not theirs to have.

Jesus is in the wilderness, without food, without companionship, without shelter. After 40 days and nights, he is ready for a good meal and probably some conversation. Here comes the tempter promising food, promising power, promising the world. And Jesus refuses to take what is offered, what might rightly be considered his. This Word made flesh, this verb, does not act. He does not reach for more. He resists. He responds word for word, prooftext for prooftext. He goes head to head with the tempter. You can almost imagine the conversation in his mind:

*“If I am really the Son of God, I could just turn a few of these stones into bread.”*

*But, no, I know that is written, ‘We live not on bread alone, but by every utterance that comes from the mouth of God.’*

And then you can see how even his hunger is overcome by exhaustion and he imagines,

*“I could just jump from the top of the temple. Scripture does say that God will tell the angels to take care of you, supporting you so that you never stumble, not even on a stone.*

*But no, it is written in the scriptures, ‘Do not put God to the test.’ I will not.”*

And then as he climbs even higher, to the very top of the mountain and sees what looks like the whole world, he thinks, *“I could have all of this. What does it matter if I worship the One God, the Roman Gods or no God at all?”* But the Word is alive, made flesh in his body. He remembers the words from Deuteronomy. *“You will worship the Most High God; God alone will you adore.”*

After this final test, perhaps he collapses with exhaustion. Matthew says now Jesus **is cared** for by angels (and the gospel of Mark tells us that the wild animals accompany him as well).

This is Jesus, being human, finding his way as he begins ministry. He does not call on God for *extra* help or succumb to the temptations put before him. He remembers who he worships and that true power lies not inside himself but beyond himself.

Paul tells us that Jesus is the new Adam. The new Adam is not made of earth like the first Adam, *but he is born* close to the earth in the stable. The new Adam stays hungry, stays at the bottom rung of the synagogue ladder and leads a rag tag band of misfits. This new Adam reaches not for forbidden fruit, but toward the others who are also made in God's image. This Word-Made-Flesh becomes the model for humanity even as his behavior often seems impossible unless he is also somehow divine.

We imagine that Jesus could have called on the angels to feed him, to care for him, yet he chose to become wholly human. He chose to identify fully with those whom he served.

This sounds like the approach taken by Dr. Mark Bergel. Bergel is the founder of A Wider Circle, where our Lenten offering goes this year. This local organization provides household items such as beds and dressers as well as personal care items to families in poverty and transition. I read on the web site that "Dr. Mark Bergel does not sleep on a bed of his own. Rather, he ends his often 17-hour workdays by collapsing onto his couch or floor, pledging not to sleep in a bed until *every child and adult* in the country has a bed on which to sleep." I am sure that Bergel could afford to be

comfortable in his own bed, but the discomfort he chooses reminds him of his mission and the people he serves.

This also sounds like Luke Yoder, one of the founders two years ago of Pink Menno. After the Mennonite Church USA biennial at Columbus, Ohio, Luke said that he would wear a Pink Menno t-shirt to church every Sunday until LGBT people are welcomed into the Mennonite Church. Luke is not gay himself, but his sister is queer. Out of solidarity with her and other gays and lesbians, he continues to wear his pink shirt on Sundays.

These are powerful models of making ones words come to life, of words being in the flesh. It reminds me though of the temptations we face. We have a sister church in Colombia. Our sisters and brothers have been living in the figurative wilderness of Sincelejo for 10 years. They have observed, on more than one occasion, that we in the North, who have everything we could possibly want, still want more. Of course they say it politely, but the reality is that we are lured by so much beautiful fruit that we are not always as faithful to the gospel as we would like to be. We commit over and over that first sin, of reaching for what is not ours and, as a result, we deprive others.

During this Lenten season, I hope we begin to see what it means to be human when we are formed by the words of Jesus and by his life story. It is not easy. It is not quick.

The story takes on different dimensions in different faces and bodies and languages. Sometimes we cannot even see what it all means unless, and until, we take time and space to get perspective. Close up, we can see the details, the words and letters. We can read the story. But step back and we begin to see a human face and

then another and another. Soon we realize that the Word forms us all. This is our story too.

As children of Eve and Adam temptations and tests are real. But as followers of the new Adam, let us become ever more human, formed in God's beautiful Word.