

“No Deal”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
I Lent – 29 February & 1 March 2020  
Genesis 2:15-27; 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

Who here remembers the classic game show, “Let’s Make a Deal”? You probably can see in your mind an audience in crazy costumes, trying to get the attention of the show’s host, Monty Hall, or more recently, catch the eye of Wayne Brady, the new host. Monty and Wayne gaze across the room and randomly pick a contestant, the most outlandish they can find, like a woman dressed as a 1920’s flapper, or a man dressed as a 1920’s flapper, or somebody that looks like a question mark. Once chosen, they bounce with excitement to their feet, and Monty or Wayne gives that person \$300. The game begins.

Monty or Wayne then offer the contestant a choice between what’s behind door number two and what’s hidden under a box. All the person needs to do is hand over the \$300 and choose, or they can walk away with the cash, but most people just can’t resist. Very rarely do they take the money in hand. They take their chances, surrender the free gift, and exchange it for the right to choose their own fate. Maybe the box hides a pile of rocks, but a vacation to Hawaii or a fancy car might be waiting behind door number two.

“Let’s Make a Deal” proves so popular because viewers experience vicarious thrills by anticipating and then second-guessing the choices made by the contestants. The lure of automatic, unearned enrichment appeals to our wildest fantasies of indulgence, and we enjoy watching someone on the hot seat, taking a risk with a decision that will result in them getting who knows what. But I think the greatest appeal of “Let’s Make a Deal” is that it highlights an experience common to everyone: temptation.

Monty Hall and Wayne Brady are masters of manipulation and temptation. That's how you get their job. If a contestant decided to surrender the cash for the mystery behind the curtain, the host might fork a few more C notes into their hand. Now with \$500, it's time to reconsider, while the audience shouts advice about what to do, and if the contestant seems inclined to walk away with the cash, then Monty or Wayne just enlarge the scope of their choice even more. "\$500 or pick among the box, door number two, AND door number three." The pressure builds with the power, and the temptation to make a choice and exert that power drives the contestant to decide their fate, and the crowd goes wild, whatever the result is.

Who here remembers a couple named Adam and Eve? Once upon a time, they met a serpent named Monty, though his friends called him Wayne. The serpent was charming and clever and knew that deep down people like to have as many options as they can, because most people feel uncertain about themselves. More choices feel like more freedom. More freedom means more chances to get what they want and need so that they feel less insecure. Most of the time, people want to do the right thing, but sometimes it's hard to know right from wrong, and sometimes, even when we know what's right, it can be hard to do.

When Monty saw Adam and Eve, he knew they felt a little insecure about who they were and what they were made for. He also knew that they were forbidden by God to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But he played dumb on that one, drew Eve into a conversation, and planted some seeds of doubt in her mind. "Would God really kill you for touching the tree or eating the fruit? Seems to me that God's been holding out something special from you. God knows if you eat it you'll become like Him. Why would God deprive you of such useful knowledge?"

Eventually, Monty managed create just enough doubt and distrust of God that he convinced Eve to disobey, eat the forbidden fruit, and share it with Adam, who accepted it without question or hesitation. And strictly speaking, Monty didn't lie. Neither Eve nor Adam dropped dead, though a different sort of death entered the world. They did gain new knowledge about reality and became more like God in a way, though they felt ashamed by what they suddenly knew, their nakedness. In fact, part of what made the temptation so compelling is that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. So promising Eve that she'd be more like God by tasting a piece of fruit must have been irresistible, because we are meant to be like God.

Human beings want to be like God because we were created by God to be like God. God wants us to become Holy through obedience, through a loving relationship of growth in grace that unfolds over time, but we would rather eat a magical apple or take some other shortcut instead, because we're anxious and impatient. We want to be like God NOW. Or better yet, just be God, because we're anxious and frightened and don't trust God. And more often than not, we want to be God for all the wrong reasons. We want God's power, but not God's responsibility. We want to be free to do whatever we please.

As Walter Brueggemann, biblical genius, puts it, "Freedom which does not discern the boundaries of human life leaves us anxious. Anxiety comes from doubting God's providence, from rejecting his care and seeking to secure our own well-being." [Interpretation Commentary Series: Genesis, p. 53-54]

Each of us knows that anxiety, that fundamental distrust. We've all had our doubts and disturbing questions. We want a power that can't be shaken so that we can feel secure, and we're desperately impatient to have it. If there's a core to what we call sin, it's our desire to be

God, even when that separates us from the love of God. But the good news is that it's a temptation we can resist: through prayer which brings self-awareness and God-awareness; through study of scripture, which reveals who we are in relationship with God; through the support and accountability that comes through a loving community of faith; and through the sole example of someone who never once gave in to temptation.

In the wilderness, Jesus met Monty after fasting forty days and forty nights. And the tempter whispered, "Those stones look like loaves of bread to me. Change them. Come on. Your fast is over. What's the harm? Exploit your power. Gratify yourself!" Standing with Jesus on the pinnacle of the Temple, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down," taunted the tempter. "Prove yourself. Take an unnecessary risk. Be somebody spectacular." On the mountaintop, Monty tempted Jesus with every throne on earth. "Worship me. Indulge yourself. Overthrow God and rule the world."

How could Jesus refuse? The kingdom, the power, and the glory could be his, no crucifixion required. What a deal! How could he shake his head and walk away, spouting scripture and praising God? Jesus, look at the good you could do, with undisputed authority and an unambiguous claim on every soul and nation. Seize the day! But no, the tempter deceives, and the wisdom of God perceives the falsehood.

Jesus kept his free gift. He knew that door number two and the apple on the tree were expensive, not free, and that there was a lot more to lose than a wad of cash. Because the gift Jesus held and treasured was priceless, incomparable, better than power. The impervious, everlasting love of God kept Jesus alive and free, and that same love seeks to embrace and enfold us.

Accept that gift, and don't barter it away for anything. Ignore Monty and Wayne, in whatever form they approach you. For the life we live is no game, and the tantalizing mystery of what may or may not be behind door number two is nothing compared with the mystery of God's never-dying love. Treasure that love as you treasure your life, because both are the same thing. And when Monty or Wayne slide into your life, just say, "No deal." Amen.