I don’t know about you, but I need the season of Lent. There is a clarity in Lent, an acknowledgment that much of life is characterized by what musicians call “blue notes”. Lent invites us to repent, to return to God, to do it Now!

If you are a visitor let me clarify that we don’t begin every service with The Great Litany, but on this first Sunday in Lent we pray this ancient Litany so we might hear and confess the truth about ourselves—that we need God’s deliverance from the multitude of ways we rationalize our sinfulness and distance ourselves from God and one another. Even the lectionary conspires to confront us with the truth since every year we begin Lent with the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness. As a bonus, this year we also hear the story of Adam and Eve’s temptation in the Garden of Eden.

The story of the “fall” of Adam and Eve, portrayed in countless works of art as a mythic explanation of the origin of sin, is perhaps better understood as a portrayal of what it means to be human. Even though God created the universe and all that is in it and pronounced it good, Adam and Eve still faced limits in their garden paradise.

Coming up against those limits opens the possibility of insecurity and rebellion. It is this insecurity that the serpent uses to call into question whether Adam and Eve should trust God. “God has not told you everything,” the serpent suggests. “If you eat of the tree of good and evil you will not die, but you will be like God,” implying that completeness and self-sufficiency lie within their grasp. By naming their incompleteness, the serpent, like a dentist probing a cavity, draws their attention to their want, their lack, their need.

The French philosopher, Blaise Pascal, described the condition of being human as one of having a God-shaped hole. He did not see this limit as a flaw, but rather as a means of finding fulfillment through one’s relationship with God. St. Augustine, centuries earlier, spoke of this same thing when he wrote in his Confessions, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.” Read from the perspective of these theologians, the Genesis narrative might be better described as a tale not of “original sin”, but of “original insecurity”.

Looking at the Gospel lesson, we see that at the heart of the temptation of Jesus rests the same provocation that God can’t be trusted. “If you are the Son of God”, the tempter begins. This “if” calls Jesus’ relationship with God into question and suggests that he could and should establish himself on his own terms. Jesus, however, resists the temptation to define himself apart from God. Instead he is content to know that in trusting God’s word spoken at his baptism, “You are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased”, he finds wholeness and peace.

The question posed for us in these texts is very important. What things in our lives present themselves as perfectly shaped to fill our own God-shaped hole? What pretenders or empty promises are we tempted to look to in hope of eliminating the “original insecurity” that we all experience?
It is instructive to note that the temptations with which Jesus wrestled were not inherently bad. In fact, looking at them more closely, we see that they were aligned with the highest aspirations of the people of Israel: providing bread in the wilderness to feed the hungry; demonstrating the spectacular power of God by jumping off the pinnacle of the temple and trusting God to deliver him; and embracing the fulfillment of Israel being a light to the nations that would someday have all the kingdoms of the world bowing before YHWH. But Jesus refused the temptation because the means suggested by Satan did not justify the ends.

Like Adam and Eve and Jesus, we are faced with temptation on a daily basis. The temptations we face are no less subtle and seductive. We are tempted to be spectacular; to give our lives worth by what we earn or power we wield. We are enticed by the messages of our culture to “control my own destiny” and “be #1” as if those are the pathways to fulfillment and security.

Moreover, like Jesus, we are tempted to cut corners to fulfill God’s plan of wholeness and salvation. The church has been tempted throughout its existence to attract followers with promises of otherworldly rewards that deny the goodness of creation and our responsibility to work for justice and peace on earth as Jesus did. The truth about our lives, which the Litany reminds us, is that we are still tempted to look to sources of our own devising to fill the God-shaped hole in our lives.

Looking again at the gospel, we see that Jesus shows us the key to resisting temptation is to find our identity in relationship with God. If we ground ourselves in the love of God who calls us “beloved children”, we are less likely to give in to the temptation to define ourselves in terms of what we own or achieve. Instead, we are free to give ourselves to relationships, to find meaning, hope, and peace in co-creating with God the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

One other pernicious aspect of this “original insecurity” with which we must wrestle is that we face temptation over and over. It is not a “one and done” kind of process. When Jesus refused to give in to the temptations in the wilderness, the devil left him for a time. However, for Jesus, temptation and doubt would reappear in the Garden of Gethsemane and the cross. Yet by placing his reliance on God, even in the face of death, Jesus showed us that God alone can fill the God-shaped hole within us. So it is with us as well. The hole within us is never filled once and for all, our awareness of the limits of our mortality and finitude never erased. To be human is to accept that we have been created for relationship with God and each other. Perhaps the goal of life is to embrace the limits of our humanity and discover God with us in our time of need. When we are tempted to find security through selfish pursuits but turn to God instead, we learn, as Jesus did, that God’s grace is sufficient for us.

Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?
Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?
Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?

These questions asked of every baptismal candidate remind us that faith does not promise that we will not face temptation, adversity, and suffering. These realities are part and parcel of what it means to be mortal. But trusting in God, as Jesus demonstrated when he faced and resisted temptation, gives us courage and grace to withstand the forces that play on our insecurity. In fact, it is by trusting God when we know ourselves at the limits of our capabilities and endurance that we discover that we do not simply survive, but flourish in the face of suffering and evil.
Jesus, who was tempted as we are and who knows the struggles we face, invites us to find hope and courage in the God who named not only him, but each of us, you and me, beloved children. On our journey toward the resurrection, we will discover our true identity as we face temptation. For many it is a fearful experience of testing, but one that is moderated by a special grace: we make this journey together, with the whole Christian church on earth, and we follow the One who has already completed the course.