

“What’s Your Temptation?”

Date: March 13, 2011

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

Occasion: Lent 1, Year A

Theme: Sanctification; Temptation, Lent

Here we are at the beginning of another Lent - the season that comes before the celebration of Easter. This passage from Matthew is often read on the first Sunday of Lent. As we begin a season of more intense spiritual devotion, we know that we will also be under intense spiritual attack. As we confess our sins and try to deepen our faith in Christ, the evil one will challenge us.

What’s your temptation? Frankly, I have a hard time identifying with Jesus in this story of his own temptations. Maybe you do too. It just doesn’t correspond with our experience: We don’t have conversations with a visible devil, nor are we whisked from place to place, as Jesus is in the story.

Plus, the temptations that Jesus faces are peculiar to him. They seem remote from those we face today. Hebrews 4:15 tells us, Jesus has been tempted in every way that we have. But what did Jesus know of the temptations that are faced daily by the recovering alcoholic and substance abuser? The lonely divorcee? The struggling business owner? The teenager who covets peer acceptance above all else? We might think that Jesus doesn’t really understand our situation.

There is, however, a common denominator that links all of these with the temptations ascribed to Jesus. The basic temptation, the underlying temptation that Jesus shared with us is the temptation to treat God as less than God. We may not be tempted to turn stones into bread, but we are constantly tempted to mistrust God’s readiness to help us face our trials. Why else do we worry?

None of us is likely to put God to the test by leaping from a cliff. But we are

frequently tempted to question God's helpfulness when things go awry in our lives. We may not be tempted to worship Satan any more than Jesus was. But compromise with the ways of the world? That is a continuing seduction.

In some ways, this was the temptation of Adam and Eve - to doubt that God's love was enough for them. God had given to the original couple everything they needed to be happy. But they doubted that God's love and care was enough.

We are all tempted, in one way or another. And it will appear in different forms for each of us. But thank goodness we have a great high priest who, tempted as we are, was able to resist such temptations by laying hold of Scripture, and firmly acknowledging that only God is God. Amen? Amen!

Here we are at the beginning of Lent, and we are invited to draw closer to God. On Ash Wednesday, we were invited to take upon ourselves some of the traditional spiritual disciplines to allow the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We were invited to fast - perhaps one day a week, or to give up something that is near and dear to us. For me, I'm giving up popcorn in the evening - its my favorite snack food.

As we take upon ourselves a new spiritual discipline, Satan will try to undermine our efforts. It's a proven spiritual truth, that when we draw closer to God, there are forces at work in the world trying to hold us back. So, perhaps we may be tempted to become discouraged, maybe even give up. Or, we may be tempted not to start at all, thinking that these spiritual disciplines are a waste of time.

Remember, Satan doesn't want you to grow in grace and in faith. Satan likes it when we are lukewarm in our faith, doing nothing. He doesn't have to fight nearly as hard as when God's children take their faith seriously. So, when we do,

Satan will try to get us off track. And that's why we are warned about it, on the 1st Sunday of Lent.

Engineers tell us that a structure that is under stress will break at its weakest point. Doctors tell us that the body develops an illness at the point of its weakest vulnerability. And so it is with the spiritual life - Satan will try to attack us at our point of weakest resistance. And that differs from person to person.

In the magazine *Discipleship Journal*, they took a survey of their readers, asking them to rank the areas of greatest spiritual challenge to them. Would you be interested in knowing what other Christians consider their biggest temptations?

Number one on the list was materialism - having and wanting more stuff. #2 was pride; #3 was self-centeredness. #4 was laziness. There was a tie for #5 - anger and lust; # 7 was envy; # 8 was gluttony and # 9 was lying. What would you say your spiritual challenges are? What are *your* temptations?

William Willimon tells about a Sunday School class he was teaching, on this very passage of Scripture. He asked the class, "How are we tempted today?" A young salesman was the first to speak.

"Temptation is when your boss calls you in, as mine did yesterday, and says, "I'm going to give you a real opportunity. I'm going to give you a bigger sales territory. We believe that you are going places, young man."

"But I don't want a bigger sales territory," the young salesman told his boss. "I'm already away from home four nights a week. It wouldn't be fair to my wife and daughter."

"Look, his boss replied. "We're asking you to do this *for* your wife and daughter. Don't you want to be a good father? It takes money to support a family these days. Sure, your little girl doesn't require much money now, but think of the

future. Think of *her* future. I'm only asking you to do this for them."

The young man told the class. "Now, *that's* temptation." And so it would be. Jesus overcame his temptation by putting his complete trust in God. And that's a good example for us. We're so concerned about "having it all." The wise person trusts that God will provide all that he or she needs. Not their greed, but their need.

Perhaps it would do us well to reconsider the word "temptation." Too often, I think, we believe that the word means a set-up for failure. But the greek word that is used really means "a test." God is giving us a test, to see how strong our faith truly is. God doesn't want us to fail. God wants us to succeed. But in order to see what our faith is really made of, we're put to the test.

Jesus, in the wilderness, was not being set up for failure. Rather, Jesus was being tested by His Heavenly Father. And of course, he passed. Not because he couldn't fail. But because He trusted His Heavenly Father. He knew the words of Scripture and he depended on them. And He never doubted that God would be enough for Him.

Remember those Christians in the magazine survey? Would you like to know how they handled their temptations? 84% said they resisted temptation by praying. 76% said they resisted temptation by avoiding compromising situations. 66% said that Bible study helped them. And 52% said that it helped to be accountable to someone else.

I think those Christians give us some good food for thought. Now isn't that funny? The things they said helped them resist temptation and grow spiritually, are the very things that we're asked to do during Lent - Deepen our prayer life, reading our Bible, getting together with other Christians.

I pray for each of you, a Holy Lent. May you draw deeper to God, closer to

Christ, and stronger in your trust in God. That's how we beat the devil. Not by ourselves, but with His help. Amen? Amen!