

“Temptation Tussle” GPPC 2-14-16  
Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Luke 4:1-13

This First Sunday in Lent, we’re going to spend some time thinking about temptation and about our old adversary, the devil. But even more important we’re going to think about Jesus’ own battle against temptation and how his response is such good news for the world and us.

When it comes to the subject of temptation, we have an embarrassment of riches, don’t we? It’s hard to beat the thinking of beautiful Hollywood bad girl Mae West who said, “I used to be Snow White, but I drifted.” “When choosing between two evils, I always choose the one I never tried before.” “I generally avoid temptation, unless I can’t resist it.”

Everybody faces temptation and everybody gives in to it occasionally. Some of it’s pretty harmless (that extra slice of chocolate cake) and we can laugh about it. But some of it isn’t.

When we give in to more serious temptation, the Bible says we are committing a sin. The word sin has different meanings. It can mean

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rebellion against God and God's good will for us. It also carries the sense of turning away from God, being separated from God. And sin is sometimes thought of as "missing the mark" the way we might miss a bull's-eye target. And when we think about how complex our lives are, a million choices we make over a lifetime, maybe we can see that we are definitely going to miss the mark sometimes.

Many years ago, I used to see a spiritual director once a month. My director had been a Roman Catholic priest. So, once a month I would go and tell him confidentially what was going on in my life, my joys and celebrations, my frustrations and pain. He would teach me different kinds of prayers—breath prayer, centering prayer, light prayer, and so on. And I would also confess some of my sins to him. I remember he prayed with me one time after I was feeling guilty for a sin and during the prayer he said something along these lines, "Lord, you love us, and you know that we make mistakes, and that's how we learn." And I thought, "That's gracious and that's right. Often, we do learn by making mistakes."

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God knows we are finite, fallible, human beings. As the 80s song goes, “I’m only human. Of flesh and blood I’m made. I’m only human. Born to make mistakes.”

Nonetheless, we’re called to grow in our faithfulness, to grow up “into the full stature of Christ,” as the Apostle Paul put it. We’re forgiven by God’s grace in Christ, yet, to use the old language of the church, we are also meant, by God’s grace, to be sanctified, to become more obedient and faithful. But there is an obstacle in the way.

The devil. The notion of the devil actually developed during the time between the writing of the Old Testament and New Testament with heavy influence from some of the Persian religions. The talking snake in the Adam and Eve story was just a talking snake in a symbolic story. The Satan (which literally translates as “the adversary,”) in the Book of Job was a member of the heavenly court functioning sort of as God’s prosecuting attorney. But by the time we get to the New Testament, the devil or Satan is depicted as the source and embodiment of evil. Here are a few things to remember.

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First, the devil, Satan, evil, whatever name you choose, is monstrously powerful. And to one degree or another every person, every creature, and all the universe is corrupted and enslaved by the power of evil. Second, though evil is diabolically mighty, it is still not nearly as great as God and God's love. As the Book of Revelation and other passages in the Bible proclaim, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, evil has been decisively defeated by God. The suffering, evil, and death we still experience are the remnant battles in a war already won by God. The rattlesnake's head has been chopped off, but it continues to snap and inject venom into victims. Third, evil specializes in trickery. As preacher William Sloane Coffin put it, evil's temptations always seem "eminently reasonable." Or as many southern boy tombstone epitaphs might read, "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

And that leads us to the temptations Jesus faced from the devil. Right after Jesus was baptized, right after he was filled with the Holy Spirit and his identity was confirmed, what happened? He got to relax on the couch and binge watch Netflix. No. Immediately following his

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baptism, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil.

If we are followers of Jesus, (and we are), this is a disconcerting way to begin the Lenten journey, isn't it? "Remember you are baptized. Remember you belong to Christ and you have promised to follow Christ. Now meet the devil." No wonder the earliest followers of Jesus said the same prayer we say, "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

Luke says the devil tempted Jesus for forty days. Jesus ate nothing during those forty days, and when they were over he was starving. And at the point when Jesus was hungry and tired, that's exactly when he faced three temptations in particular. Like Jesus, you and I will be most vulnerable to temptation when we are tired and hungry and alone. Beware.

First temptation: "*If you're God's Son, turn this stone into bread.*" So the temptation is to prove Jesus' identity with a miracle. And it sounds like a great miracle. Stone into bread. Bread enough to feed the

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whole world! “Eminently reasonable.” Who’s going to quibble with that?

But Jesus answered with a scripture quote, “We don’t live by bread alone.” And the rest of the quote goes, “but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” Jesus refused to rely upon himself. He relied upon God.

Second temptation. The devil took Jesus on an I-Max, panoramic tour of the kingdoms of the world. “Jesus,” said the devil, “I’ll give you their glory and authority, because it’s mine after all. And I give it to whomever I wish. Just worship me and you can have the prize behind door number two.”

So the temptation is to trade glory and authority for the small price of worshipping the devil.

Again, Jesus answered with a quote from scripture. “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.”

Third temptation. The devil took Jesus up on the top of the temple. “If you’re God’s Son, throw yourself down from here. After all, it’s right

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there in the Bible, 91<sup>st</sup> Psalm. God will send angels to catch you. You won't even bang your foot."

So again, the temptation is about proving the identity of Jesus by doing something spectacular. But this time, the devil used a new strategy and quoted scripture. Nice touch. And a good reminder that scripture can be quoted for good or for evil. The intention matters.

Luke says Jesus rejected all the devil's temptations. And the devil left until an opportune time.

One temptation for the preacher is to tell the congregation. "Now, if you'll just worship here on Sunday each week, immerse yourself in the comfort and challenge of this faith community, say your daily prayers, memorize some scripture, and take part in a Bible study, you too will reject all the devil's temptations." But we know that's simply not true. If you and I engage in the spiritual disciplines, we probably will be more faithful and more obedient to God. Of course, we might also become arrogant about how faithful and spiritual we imagine ourselves to be! The devil is sneaky that way!

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But, thank God, the story of Jesus' temptation cannot be reduced to the postage stamp size portrait of your or my struggle against temptation. Instead, this story is painted on a canvas the size of the universe, because what is at stake is the promise of God's faithfulness to us and indeed the world. And Jesus paints that portrait in the dazzling colors of self-giving love instead of the bland sameness of self-aggrandizing power that the devil tempts him with.

This Lent let's tussle against temptation. If temptation comes our way, we're probably doing something good that evil wishes to thwart. So let's fight against temptation, but do so always trusting not in our own faithfulness, but in the one who was and is faithful to us and all the world—Jesus the Christ, our Lord and our Savior. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal