

1 Lent
Christ and Grace
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Matthew 4:1-11
March 1, 2020

Have you ever been tempted? Tempted to eat something that is not on your diet plan? Tempted to sleep in instead of exercising before work or watch Netflix instead of reading your Lenten devotional? Or maybe you have been tempted to gossip or tell a little white lie about something because it's convenient. Maybe your temptations have been more challenging like fudging your taxes or driving home after a party knowing you've probably had a bit too much to drink. Maybe your temptations are not for the church audience. Life is filled with temptations, large and small. We can be tempted anywhere at any time but where does temptation originate?

Satan, the serpent, the devil, the tempter – all of these words are used in our readings today to describe the source of temptation. In the Hebrew language Satan is a word meaning adversary. It was the word used for the prosecuting attorney in a court of law (my apologies to any lawyers in the room!) In the Greek language devil is derived from the word diabolos, meaning slanderer or accuser. What we have are examples of ordinary words that have been turned into negative religious language. How any of these words evolved into the little red man with a pitchfork that we find on a can of Underwood deviled ham is a mystery! Other temptation images include an apple and a snake. All these ordinary words and images have become symbols for temptation, in the same way that ordinary things in our own lives can become temptations for us, can distract us from our relationship with God.

If you have ever been tempted in any way (and I am pretty sure we all have been!) you are not alone. Temptation has been going on since Adam and Eve. It seems none of us are exempt from temptation. In the case of Adam and Eve, they are living in paradise – what could be better? God has given them everything they need. But when the serpent suggests that they could have even more, they suddenly have to have it. They think they must be missing something, and a piece of fruit from the forbidden tree becomes their greatest desire.

Human nature is like this. When the sign says “wet paint” we are so tempted to touch it! When we know we have enough, we still want more. Listening to NPR on my drive home from Council, the conversation was about the allure of the word “free” – that if something is free, we automatically want it, whether we need it or not! Adam and Eve were tempted give up a trusting relationship with God in order to have something they did not need, because the tempter said it was free.

Even Jesus experienced temptation. As soon as he was baptized and heard the voice of God saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” he was led up by the Spirit, still dripping with baptismal water, into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And the devil knows just how to tempt us all – with good and desirable things! Whenever we feel less than, unappreciated, lost, empty, or not good enough we are open for temptation. Whenever we feel overwhelmed by life's challenges the wilderness can become very real for us.

With each temptation of Jesus in his wilderness, the adversary is suggesting that he deserves better than God is giving him. Why should the Son of God be hungry? Why should he be at risk

for pain and suffering? Why should he not live a life in complete luxury and control? But Jesus knows that it is God who has the power and dominion over the world, not the devil, so he rejects him saying, “away with you, Satan!” We too are God’s beloved, living in a world of temptation. We long for a relationship with God but there are so many distractions. Think about what distracts you... what has already wedged its way between you and God?

There are so many temptations and so little time! One of the many temptations we face today is the glut of advertising and information, and most of us can admit that we are distracted by it. Whether it’s in the form of social media, nightly news, or endless commercials, we are constantly bombarded by images of temptation. We can become just as addicted to information as we can to anything else. It’s tempting to spend too long on Facebook, too long watching newsfeeds that play the same news over and over, too long wandering through online websites looking for the next perfect thing that will make our lives better.

We have become convinced that we need these connections, this information, these material things to get through life. But we have been distracted from the source of life. More often than not, all these things only cause us to be more protective, more fearful, and more anxious. Our speaker at Council this weekend and Bishop Haynes both reminded us of this wilderness that media can create for us.

Temptation is a temptation precisely because it looks good to us. We are quick to rationalize our actions as being a good thing, a harmless thing, even a deserved thing. But look more closely at the interaction Jesus had with the devil in the wilderness. Notice that the central issue in those three temptations concerned who or what would determine Jesus’ actions. Would it be God or the devil? Is that not how it is with us and with any of our temptations? Whether we are tempted to tell that little white lie or tempted to actions having far more serious consequences, who or what will determine our actions?

Jesus shows us that the best defense against temptation is to remember our identity in our relationship with God. Remembering our Baptism, when God gave us our identity as beloved children, we are strengthened to stand firm against temptation. And on those days when we do give in to temptation, and we will, defining ourselves in terms of what we think we need, rather than in terms of our relationship with God who provides all that we need, there is grace. Because there is no place where God is not, no wilderness where we are alone.

For the season of Lent, we have again filled the baptismal font with sand. I invite you to touch it when you pass by, let it sift through your fingers. Whatever wilderness you may be traveling through this Lent, may the sand be a reminder to you that while your wilderness might be filled with demons or temptations or even a sense of dry, parched emptiness, God is with you.

The world and its temptations can all too easily determine our actions. What in your life is wedging its way between you and God? Whether your temptation is an ordinary or extraordinary thing, remember your baptism, remember that there is no wilderness where God is not, and remember that you are a beloved child of God.

Amen.