

March 10, 2019
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Tips for Withstanding Temptation

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Luke 4:1-13

It was a beautiful late Spring Friday evening, when I got the phone call many, many years ago. On the other end of the phone was a distraught mother. “We are at the hospital”, she said, “in the Emergency Room.” “We still don’t understand what has happened, but I wondered if you could come.”

I did go. And what began to be clear was that their young teenage daughter had been invited to skip school by some older, cool boys, and had gone with them and ended up at one of the boys’ homes where they were sure the parents would not return and they could have access to a whole home bar of alcohol. It was a mess. But it was a mess that many can identify with. Whether it is our own stories of temptation or the stories of how those we love have been tempted, we know the power of having someone say to us, “Why don’t you We are going to It will be so much fun No one will ever know. . . .”

The season of Lent is the 40-day period of preparation that Christians have observed since the early days of the organized Church. It is intended to be a period during which we take an unrelenting inventory of ourselves and examine our spiritual health and take steps to live the faith as we hope to continue to live it for the other 325 days of the year. It is an old Christian traditional to begin the Lenten Season, this season of reflection and preparation, with a reading of the temptation of Christ, as we read this morning. This passage is understood to be Jesus’ private preparation for his public ministry. But I’d like to look at it today through the lens of our experience of temptation.

As I was thinking of these scriptures, I realized that I don’t know when I have ever heard a sermon on temptation – at least in a Presbyterian Church. And, I guess that I have a slight fear of echoing a Saturday Night Live Skit that involves “The Church Lady.” But, when we really read this story of Jesus’ temptation, which shows up in Matthew, Mark and Luke, we so quickly see ourselves that I’m going to risk it.

When the devil shows up in this story, Jesus is tempted with universal human temptations. First, Jesus is tempted with the power to fill every hunger. After 40 days of fasting, the invitation to “command this stone to become a loaf of bread” is an obvious place to begin. And even if we have never fasted for 1 day – much less 40 – we know the temptation to fill our every hunger! Whether it is a hunger to eat more than we need, to buy the newest technology,

to buy a bigger house, fill every sexual hunger, to hunger for more affirmation or recognition – whatever our hunger, we know the power of the temptation to fill it. And in a consumer culture that is built on the assumption that we will always hunger for more, the resistance to filling our every hunger even comes off as un-American. It was Steve Jobs who said that “people don’t know what they want until you show it to them.” We hunger, and it is tempting to fill our hunger with more – bread, real estate, sex, affirmation, you fill in your hunger description. But Jesus says, bread alone is not what it means to live. Simply filling every hunger is not what it means to live.

Failing to tempt Jesus with hunger, the devil turns to tempt him with glory and authority. Note the assumption here is that the devil has and can grant power, glory and earthly authority. If we claim not to have felt this temptation, then we are not paying attention or we are not being honest with ourselves. The temptation to gather to ourselves power, affirmation and authority is perhaps even more a more powerful temptation than hunger. And let’s be clear that this temptation – all of these temptations – have both worldly and secular manifestations as well as their sacred/faith manifestation. So, we sitting in this sanctuary must look clearly at our own use of the Christian faith and name how we have used the Gospel to solidify our own power.

My brother and his wife just moved to the upstate, where they had begun to visit a church. They liked the Bible Studies very much and enjoyed the worship. But when they attended a session to learn more about the church, there was a slide that had pictures of all of the leadership -the group who governed the church. And my sister-in-law called me to ask my opinion. She told me that every face on the slide looked exactly the same, handsome, white men in a suit and tie. And when my brother began to question this, one of the leaders took him aside and began to explain that women were allowed leadership, within limits. They had an active women’s ministry where women were allowed to teach other women and children, but that they believed as a congregation that leadership was reserved for men. And my brother, told me that he asked the congregational leader, “Do you believe that the Holy Spirit gives out Spiritual gifts on the basis of sex? Or is God free to give spiritual gifts to whomever the Spirit chooses?”

It is so easy for us holy people to gather to ourselves power, authority and glory that is self-congratulatory and excludes others. But Jesus says, “worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” And here is the hard part. It is very easy for me to see where “they” do this. The harder question is, “Where do we do this?”

Finally, the devil tempts Jesus to prove himself. Here – I wish I had 20 more minutes to talk. I have begun to believe that this temptation is where The Church and we as followers of Christ must be most ruthless with ourselves. Either we are saved by grace, or we are all lost. Prove yourself, says the devil. And so we do – or we sure do try. We try to prove ourselves lovable. We try to prove ourselves as leaders. We try to prove ourselves good. We try to prove ourselves valuable. The Gospel says, we are – by virtue of our creation – children of God. And the very basic nature of being a child of God means that we belong to God who loves us. But we reject that Gospel, and spend tremendous amounts of energy to prove ourselves, not believing

or trusting that God has already loved us, gifted us, claimed us. God saves us through the gift of Grace. We want more. We want to prove ourselves. Malcolm Forbes is reported to have said, "Too many people overvalue what they are not, and undervalue what they are." We are children of a God who loves us. But we are not content. We want to prove ourselves to be much more.

One of the most convicting verses of Scripture – for me – comes from the mouth of John the Baptist in John's Gospel. When people came to John to ask him about Jesus, instead of pointing to his own power and authority, John pointed to Jesus and said, "He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:30) That is as close to a motto of the Christian life as I can find in Scripture.

If we find here in Luke anything that rings true for us, then it seems important to point to the spiritual tool or weapon that Jesus uses, and that Scripture as a whole gives us, to resist these powerful, universal temptations. The answer is obvious; like the nose on our face.

Jesus uses Scripture. He knows the whole story of the relationship between God and humanity and he rehearses parts of that story to remind the Devil of what is true. Reminding us of what is true is also the purpose of the passage we read in Deuteronomy. When the Israelites came to possess the promised land – the land that had been promised by God to their ancestors – the writers of Scripture knew only too well how easy it is for us to believe that what we have is ours – that we deserve what we have, own what we have and should preserve what we have. Over and over again, the Old Testament exhorts the people of God to REMEMBER that all that they had was a gift from God and it did not belong to them. So, when the ancient Israelites showed up to give God their offerings, they were instructed to repeat their own history of grace and truth. "My ancestors were poor, wandering Arameans [read "nobodies!"]. And the history they repeated was an accounting of how God had intervened in history to provide what they needed and to place them in a "land flowing with milk and honey." And how that very history required them to celebrate and to share that bounty with everyone – from the priests to the immigrants and aliens.

To resist temptation, we also need to rehearse our history. That is a great reason to make worship a priority and a habit. Because when we gather we remember together our history. We say again who we are, and whose we are. And that remembering – that history – helps keep us rooted in truth and humility and gratitude. And truth, humility and gratitude are the only weapons that are effective to withstand the temptations of hunger, glory and authority and the temptation to prove ourselves loveable and valuable.

I have always remembered my conversation, weeks later, with that young teenage girl a couple of weeks after the ER visit. When I asked her to tell me what happened, she told me that it was a cute, older boy who invited her to skip school and promised "a good time." When I asked her what she said to herself – what was the conversation that happened in your head as you were deciding – she said, "nothing. There was no conversation. I just went."

I challenge us all to think about how we talk to ourselves as we are under assault – by social and mainstream media, by friends and family, by the expectations of the culture or of those in authority over us. What do we say to ourselves when they say, “just lie this once”? What is our history of truth, grace and providential care? Do we follow the demands and temptations of the world without a challenge? Or can we learn to say to ourselves and to the world, “I am a child of God, which means that I belong to God who loves me.” Nothing that the world can offer is as valuable as that. We are to remember and to tell ourselves the story of God’s grace, when we are tempted. Remember who we are and whose we are. Then, we will be better equipped to resist the temptation to let go of our status as beloved children of God in order to take hold of something that is temporary, glittery and worthless in any eternal sense.

Who are you? **I am a child of God.**

What does it mean to be a child of God? **That I belong to God who loves me.**