

"It's Tempting."

Gen. 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Ps. 32; Matt. 4:1-11

Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church

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Our Lenten Journey begins in the wilderness with Jesus. He is there after his baptism. In his baptism Jesus had followed the command of God and had fulfilled God's righteous plan that he would be numbered among the people he came to serve and save.

But no sooner had the voice from heaven declared his identity as God's Son than the Spirit of God goaded him along the path to the wilderness where he would spend the next 40 days in deprivation and need.

We may pride ourselves on our ability to resist temptation, but how much of the time is that based on our feelings of well-being and satisfaction? When we have just finished stuffing ourselves to the gills at a party or a meal, just how tempting is that brownie with the gooey double chocolate frosting?

We may be very good with money. We may be able to cover all the bills and our financial future looks bright. How tempting then is the "get-rich-quick" opportunity that looks (and probably is) "too good to be true"?

If our relationship with our significant other is just outstanding and we can't wait for Valentine's Day to come because of the fabulous plans we have in store for them, are we really going to be looking for greener pastures?

If we've been treated fairly, with kindness and grace, all our lives, are we more or less likely to behave that way toward others?

Doesn't a great deal of the power of temptation rest in its ability to trip us up when we are weak, not when we are strong? And the power of temptation also rests in its availability. It has to be within our grasp in order to be a real temptation.

I was talking with someone this past week about Mitt Romney's decision to pull out of the race. The person commented, "He just spent 40 million dollars of his own money! I can't imagine that kind of drive to power."

Neither can I. And since I don't have 40 million to spend on such a bid I think it is safe to say it won't tempt me.

But there are many other temptations that are within reach. Today we are ordaining and installing elders and deacons, officers of our church who will serve all of us in positions of leadership. Granted, it didn't cost any of them 40 million, but it has cost them time and energy and worry and concern on behalf of us all.

Did they give into the temptation to lead? More likely, the truth is they resisted the temptation to "let someone else do it." This is a temptation for all of us, is it not?

We have each been given gifts by God and our calling is to use them for the common good, but we allow ourselves to be talked out of it. We have family concerns, jobs that demand much of us, issues that we cannot discuss with anyone for fear they will think we are whining or worse, that we are vulnerable and weak. We think we have nothing to offer. And, after all, God understands,

right? So we can resist the temptation to say "yes". But where is the real temptation and what is it we are called to resist?

When does the temptation to "be all that we can be" conflict with God's command to be what we are called to be as children of God?

At his baptism Jesus was called "my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (Matt. 3:17)

Now, 40 days later, after enduring deprivation and starvation and the solitude of the wilderness, far from cheering crowd Jesus has been given over to the power of the devil. In the Hebrew tradition the devil or Satan is "The Accuser", the challenger, the one who says "Oh yeah? Who says so?"

We've already encountered the Accuser in the Garden of Eden: "Oh yeah? Did God really say you shall not eat of any tree in the garden?" We all know where that line of questioning led.

Now, here in the wilderness, the devil has allowed Jesus to spend over a month in fasting: saying his prayers, watching the progress of the sun across the parched landscape, shivering through the long night, overwhelmed by the silence that envelops desert wastes.

Day 40 arrives. All this time there has been no word, no encounter, no fall of the other shoe. Suddenly the tempter arrives and goes right to the heart of Jesus' needs. You have already heard the conversation they had as one by one, the devil launches an assault on Jesus' identity, pride and ambition.

Aching with hunger, changing stones into bread and having a ministry of magic by which all the hungry masses would be fed

has to be enticing. And all alone in the wilderness, who wouldn't have begun to question whether anyone cared? How better to let God be true to his word and show how much he loved Jesus than to call in the angel air command?

And since Jesus was born to be King of kings and Lord of lords, in charge of all the kingdoms of the world, why not cut to the chase and just "do it"? This is Jesus' destiny, is it not?

Henri Nouwen, a well-known Christian writer and teacher, gave up his teaching post to work with mentally and physically challenged adults in the L'Arché Community in Toronto.

As he reflected on the temptations of Christ and the things that tempt each of us he saw these temptations in this way. The first (change these stones into bread) is the temptation to be relevant. Give people what they really need and really can use. Don't get caught up in the irrelevance of leading a spiritual life, (much less in caring for those who are compromised in mind or body).

The second is the temptation to be spectacular. "Wow! Did you hear what's happening over at the XYZ Church? Let's go!"

The third temptation is the temptation to be in power and in control over others instead of being in a loving relationship with them.

The members of the L'Arché Community didn't care who Nouwen was as a world renowned Christian leader. They didn't care how much he'd written or how he had impacted the lives of many. All they cared about was whether he loved them and cared for them.

I think Nouwen was right when he saw these temptations as lying close to the heart of what tempts us, of what tempted Jesus, and what tempts the church he loves and calls to be his witness in the world.

And the antidote to these temptations, then and now, is much the same. Jesus shows us the path through a forest of seemingly good choices to make the best choice, whether we are strong or weak, on top of our game or far from the field.

As he faces temptation, Jesus' main defense is going to come from Scripture. Later on in his ministry he will be heard to say: "You have heard it said... but I say to you..." and he will go on to interpret the tradition of the Scripture in ways that bring it home to all.

But not here. Jesus is using the Scripture that he has learned from his youth and he is bringing it to bear on his own situation and experience. He has rightly understood that the temptations placed before him are real, they are within reach, and they are wrong.

Jesus' obedience to the power of the Scripture and to the knowledge of who he is enables him to resist going down that road we so often and so quickly travel: that road of self-justification where the signs all point to us as the center of it all, where our needs, wants and desires are the focal point, and having the power to do something makes it ok.

Scripture is a powerful tool and knowing the Scripture is a tremendous help, especially at times of temptation. But built into this story is an important thing to remember: the devil, is not just persistent and dangerous, the devil is also a scholar of

Scripture. The devil knows his Bible and can use it to justify his point of view.

Just knowing our Bible isn't a guarantee that we will use it wisely or always for God-centered reasons. We live in a time when many God-fearing and God-following folks are using Holy Scripture as the justification for all kinds of points of view and programs, agendas and angry assaults on the rights and lives of others.

So, if it does nothing else, this story should call us to the task of reading and studying our Scripture. We need to know our script so that we can use it wisely and bring it to bear on the complex issues we face each and every day. This season of Lent is a prime time to dig into the Bible and begin a regular study schedule.

If we don't know our Scripture, how will we hope to stand up to the temptations that cross our paths - temptations to rationalize our behavior, to pass judgment on others, to stray across lines of integrity and honesty and fidelity to those whom we love? How will we learn who Jesus is apart from the Holy Scriptures?

This story reminds us that Scripture and our knowledge of it can be our first line of defense as we strive to live lives that are pleasing in God's sight.

Then, instead of being intent on being our own people, going our own way, we might decide instead to be God's people and go the way that God calls us to so that, in the end, we too might hear the words of blessing, "You are my beloved child in whom I am well pleased."

As we ordain and install elders and deacons today we do so with a mixture of gratitude and conviction. We are grateful that they

have answered the call to serve and we are convicted of the fact that we are all in this together. This is Christ's church, to be sure, and we are Christ's people. Just as he came to serve rather than to be served, may we choose to serve so that the cause of Christ might be advanced in how we live, how we love one another, how we proclaim Christ, and how we resist the temptation to be any more or any less than what God has called us to be as servants of the living God.

May it be so for us. Amen.

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