

Tempted



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Luke 4:1-13

A young man was sent to Spain by his company to work in a new plant. He accepted because it would enable him to earn enough to marry his long-time girlfriend. Their plan was to pool their resources and put a down payment on a house when he returned. As the lonely weeks went by, she began to express doubts that he was being true to her. After all, Spain is populated by beautiful women. The young man declared that he was paying absolutely no attention to the local girls. "I admit," he wrote, "that sometimes I'm tempted. But I fight it. I'm keeping myself for you."

In the next mail, the young man received a package. It contained a note and a harmonica. "I'm sending this to you," his girlfriend wrote, "so you can have something to take your mind off those girls." The young man wrote back that he was practicing on his harmonica every night and thinking only of her. When the young man returned home to the states his girl was waiting at the airport. As he rushed forward to embrace her, she held up a restraining hand and said sternly, "Hold on there. First I want to hear you play that harmonica!"

The story of human life is the story of temptation - the effort to live as we intend not as we are driven. The question is what harmonica can we use to help us? How can we face the craftiness of the devil ourselves as Jesus faced the devil in the wilderness? The root of the temptation was to get Jesus to turn from God to self, from dedication to God to grasping for one's own appetite, ego, power and fame.

Biblical scholar Darrell Jodock states *"Jesus was tempted to modify his ministry ever so slightly so that the purposes of his life were no longer God's but his own."* Jodock goes on to say that we face very similar enticements, as he says, *"The temptation in question is of a far deeper kind: a temptation to distort our own selfhood.... Jesus was tempted to misconstrue his relationship with God.... During Lent we consider those temptations that twist the faith and the ethics of the kingdom of God in ways that distort the believer's relationship to God, thereby distorting the self and its relationship to the people God loves."* In small and subtle ways, we can end up distorting our relationship to God and each other - so that we end up moving toward selfishness rather than God.

In our story today Jesus is being encouraged by the Tempter to act this way. The Tempter says, "Look, you're the son of God, right? God's Son! So the rules don't apply – do whatever you want to do. Make stuff happen, whatever you want: turn stones in to bread, rule the world, lord over others, make it into whatever you like; jump off the tower in Jerusalem for kicks. Angels will come and cushion your fall." Sounds very tempting, right? Do whatever you want. You're in charge. The world's your oyster.

Isn't that a temptation we're being sold day after day in our world? Advertisers promote this dream: Do what you want.... buy what you want... travel where you want...who cares about rules or boundaries, just put your money down, and whatever you dream can become a reality. Presto! Magic! It's all for you to get what you want. It's your dime. Legally it's fine.

But what about religiously, morally, spiritually? Well, that's where Jesus pushes back. He steps up to teach us the downfalls. The Tempter says: "Do what you please, you've got the power and the resources. You're a spiritual billionaire!" But Jesus replies: "It's not just about what I want that matters; it's about what God intends; it's about how scripture calls us to live; it's about obeying the path God has set before us. That's what gives us a good life." So essentially, it's not just about ME, it's about GOD. It's not just about my desires, but about what is right and good and true and loving.

Lent is a time for us to step back from our blind and relentless pursuit of personal gratification to seek a higher vision: harmony with God, moral integrity, kindness to others, listening to the hurts and hopes of others beyond ourselves. It means carving out space within our lives for reflection, for prayer, for self-discipline. It can even mean

fasting – fasting from selfishness and egotism, fasting from consumer gluttony, fasting from anger and resentment, fasting from petty grudges and fixations, fasting from the frantic pace of our schedules, fasting from ME, ME, ME! Lent can be a refreshing time of cleansing our spirits from the goo and grunge of social media and internet slop, trite TV stories filled with chuckles and nonsense, gratifying our most stupid desires. Lent is getting out from under the deluge of illusion, the waterfall of temptation, the firehose of news and entertainment, and seeking simple truths and higher ground. Lent is inner spring cleaning. Lent is shouting: Enough! "Basta!" Get behind me Satan!

None of us can escape temptation. The point is not to run away from temptation. Jesus did not run from the devil. There is no escape, because in essence we are facing ourselves; that part of us that wants to leap over the barriers of morality or prohibition to live just for our own pleasure. Jesus did not run away, he stood up to the devil, face to face. The point is to learn to deal with temptation constructively, thoughtfully, and courageously. The more we are able to tap into our own inner strength, and the more we can rely on the support of our community of faith; the more able we will be to deal with storms of temptation.

It doesn't take much to make this shift. It is not a large movement - just a little twist of thought to move away from focusing just on ourselves.

- It's just a small shift from working the cash register for the boss, to short changing a few customers, to pocketing small bills night after night.

- It's just a small shift from sending money for charities to help stop hunger or torture overseas to saying, "Hey, I can use this money for my new golf clubs or another game for my computer."

- It's not a big leap from serving faithfully to represent one's constituency, to then taking a few trips with a lobbyist for an industry, to then putting some large campaign contributions into a secret trust fund...

The temptations Jesus faced were to serve himself and his own desires or to serve God, the way, and truth. *Stanley Jones, a famed evangelist, told a story about visiting an ascetic in India who sought to escape temptation by going to live in a cave in an isolated forest and spending all his time in spiritual meditation. The first thing the ascetic said to him was, "I haven't thought about sex in forty years." "Now," Stanley Jones slyly commented, "isn't it strange that this was the first thing he said to me?"*

We face similar temptations now in our nation - to make a change away from serving the common good to serving a personality. We are being asked to give up on a commitment to serving the poor, the environment, education, journalism, science, medical access. *"Hey, I have a right to keep my hard-earned money. Why should I support those people?"* Sounds reasonable. But what happens when this thinking shuts out all sense of compassion or stewardship. The danger is making that shift in thinking

that leads us away from a commitment to the most vulnerable - to shift it back to ourselves and our wealth. It is only a slight movement away from God and toward ourselves. Jesus was able to counter it. We can counter it as well.

So, what can help us with the temptations that we face? How do we stand strongly against what the devil throws our way? What is our harmonica that we can use to resist temptation? One is through the support of others who share the values of God's kingdom. Maybe that's why the first thing Jesus did when he came out of the wilderness was to gather a support group. Disciples. Being with people who are community-minded and caring, who give us support and strength in our own battles against temptation. That's why support groups are so important, like A.A. or N.A., Parents Anonymous, or whatever. This church hosts excellent support groups – and our church worship service is a support group that reminds us of our deepest values and healthy pathways. Week after week It reinforces the values we live by and to deflect the barrage of temptations we face.

Another way to fight temptation is through disciplines of prayer or exercise or many other pathways that focus our minds and hearts. Spiritual disciplines like reading scripture, taking quiet time, fasting, or meditating can give us a measure of inner strength and clarity of heart to face our temptations. Dr. Smiley Blanton, a psychiatrist and a founder of the Blanton-Peale Institute where my wife, Martha trained, said it this way: *"For more than forty years as a practicing psychiatrist, I have been trying to help people who have come to me because they are in trouble simply because they don't know how to handle temptation. Every day of your life, no matter how sheltered you are, you face some choice in which the wrong action is so seductive, so plausible, so pleasurable that it takes a conscious effort of will to reject it. Coming from a psychiatrist, this may seem surprising advice. But after a long life spent observing human behavior, I have no doubt whatever that, entirely apart from its religious significance, prayer is one of the most effective methods of tapping the wisdom and power that exists in dealing with temptation. Self-surrender is the key. When this attitude pervades the conscious mind and sinks deep into the unconscious, the result is a serenity and clarity of thought that make right decisions not only possible, but almost inevitable."* Prayer gives us that inner light to shine upon the darkness of sin.

This Lent, let's resist the temptations that the Tempter throws at us to make it all about ME, ME, ME. Like Jesus in the desert, let's take time to consider what God wants. Let's obey simple guidelines God has taught throughout the centuries: be humble, be generous, be considerate, be wise, be brave, be disciplined. If we live this way, we will find that we are deeply satisfied, at ease....and even joyful. Thanks be to God. Amen.