

TEMPTATION

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him. --- Matthew 4:1-11

Today is the first Sunday during the season of Lent, and as today's reading makes clear, Lent is not a time of "Bad News" that comes before the "Good News" of Easter. Rather, Lent is a time of grace when the children of God reflect upon their own sin and mortality, as well as on the redemptive power of God by which we are all saved. The original failure of the parents of humanity, Adam and Eve, are contrasted with the victory of the Second Adam, Jesus, as he overcomes temptation in the desert.

If I were to casually ask each of you what you thought about temptation, I would get as many different answers as there are people here. Someone would probably respond with "Oh, I cannot resist chocolate; it always gets the best of me." Someone else would probably tell of a naughty thing they did when they were a teenager, hiding behind the bushes and throwing water balloons at people passing by.

This might come as a shock to some of you, but I am easily tempted to over indulge in good food, especially fatty foods and sweets. Yes, I am sure you find that quite shocking as svelte as I am. My best friend and colleague, Bill Jones, and I use to go to lunch every week, and the waitress would always bring out the dessert cart to tempt us with. She would say "We have Snickerdoodle cheesecake, Pecan pie with a scoop of vanilla, key lime pie...". "Oh, I probably shouldn't". "Are you sure?". "Well, OK, since you tempted me. I'll have the chocolate fudge brownie with the ice cream and a cherry, and could you put a little swirl of cool whip on top?" Yet Bill, my friend, always had the strength and discipline to say, "Get behind me, Satan."

I remember once when I was 19 and worked at the newspaper and my girlfriend wanted to go to Yosemite for the weekend, so I told my boss my grandmother died and that I needed three days for bereavement leave. When I came back from the weekend at Yosemite I was telling my friends when the boss came by and she asked me, "How was the funeral?" "What funeral?" I asked. "Your grandmother's funeral." "Oh yeah, it went well." "I felt increasingly guilty, day by day."

And the temptation grows, changes. A friend is sitting on the porch outside with a shot gun next to him, crying because his life is on the line. He is a professional man, a psychologist, who has lost his job and career because of an addiction to drugs. His wife is fed up with it all, ready to leave him. "I'll never use drugs or alcohol again, I swear." But he knows, when I leave and

his wife isn't looking that he has a stash of pain pills hidden in the trunk of his car. "What difference will it make, nobody will know, and it isn't anybodies business but my own." Temptation can ruin a person's life.

A colleague of mine in Illinois once told me he called on one of the shut-ins from his church one day. When his hostess got up to get him a glass of iced tea, he noticed a dish of peanuts sitting on the coffee table. He began eating them, and before she came back into the room, he had devoured the whole bowl. When she came in, he confessed that he had been tempted by the peanuts and apologized for giving in to the temptation. She quaintly smiled and retorted "Oh, don't worry about it, I don't eat the peanuts, just the chocolate covering."

I never took the temptation story all that seriously until recently. This is the son of God we are talking about here, he wouldn't be tempted to do evil, would he? But he is fully human, you know? He was tempted as we are tempted, but we aren't talking about fudge brownies or cheating on your taxes. We are talking about big time temptation after being in the desert for 40 days and nights with no food.

And the devil says to him, "Are you hungry? Why not take a rock and turn it into a loaf of bread and feed yourself?" What would be wrong with that? It makes sense, does it not? Who would blame him. Satan says "hey, you've never performed a miracle in your life, and you don't want to go out in public and do your first and flop." "Jesus humbly replies, "Man does not live by bread alone."

Not willing to give up, Satan ups the ante and says, If you really want to impress the crowd, why don't you jump off the top of the temple steeple? God will catch you and you won't have a scratch. I read it in the Bible, it says it right here. And the people will be so impressed they'll know you are the son of God." It must have been tempting, otherwise it wouldn't be fair to call it a temptation, would it? The devil is right you know, people will be impressed. But Jesus replies "It is not right to put God to the test."

Finally, the devil takes his best shot. "I will give you all the kingdoms of the world to rule over as you wish. You will have power in the social realm as well as political, more influential than the president, more popular than a rock star, if you will just bow down and worship me." Wouldn't it be great if Jesus was the ruler of the world? Nothing wrong with that. But Jesus puts

the kibosh on that and says "Get away from me, Satan, for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Temptation isn't so much about choosing right from wrong. Any fool can do that. And I don't think the devil is so lame that he would waste his time using chocolate fudge brownies as a temptation to bring you down. The temptations Jesus was presented with was the same temptation used on Adam and Eve: The question is, "Would you like to be as God?" not "Would you like to live like the devil?" And what is wrong with wanting to be like God? Is that not something we are to strive to be like?

Temptation has nothing to do with lying to your boss, choosing from an assortment of scrumptious cheesecakes, or even whether to use pain pills. The question posed to Adam, then presented to Jesus, and finally to you and I is, "What are you going to do with your life?" This is the most important question you will ever need to answer, it is literally the only and final exam of your life. What are you going to do with your life? Another way to phrase it is, "What is God's will for me?"

When it all comes to a close on your life, will you be able to say that you lived your life with integrity, living your life in the direction that God called you? This is what the season of Lent is all about, a time to reflect on the direction of your life, asking yourself "What is God's will for my life?" It has nothing to do with chocolate desserts, refraining from this or that, giving up meat, or any other trifle matter. The questions you need to ask yourself, reflect on, and answer in one paragraph, are: What is my life? What am I all about? You have six Sunday's to answer the questions.

May you be blessed in your struggles with God and yourself during this season of Lent.