

The First Sunday in Lent
March 5, 2017
Matt. 4:1-11

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Temptation as Gift

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Each time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to "Save us from the time of trial." Or, in the older form, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

What are we really praying for? Do we fully know what we are saying? Isn't temptation, after all, a universal—and, perhaps, a good thing? Yes, I said "good." A gift.

Temptation Is Necessary to the Spiritual Life

Animals aren't tempted. As Mark Twain once noted, "[Humans] are the only animals that blush—or need to." The uniqueness of being human rests in our ability to choose between good and evil. Without choice we would be automatons. All of us are tempted—God created us with free will and the blessed capacity for moral choice.

My history professor in college said something about temptation that has stuck with me ever since, because I think it's true and because I like the way he put it: "Abstinence in the face of the lack of temptation is not a virtue." What he was saying is that we human beings need choices, temptations both for the good and the bad, to be able to act morally. If we can't choose what is the correct or the moral or the Christian thing to do, what we do is not morally praiseworthy. We have no reason to praise what is not chosen.

And beyond our need of the choice, we have no way of getting around having to make the choice. God created us with the capacity for moral choice; temptation is a universal. As a moral essayist has written, "It is good to be without vices, but it is not good to be without temptations."

I'm reminded of the cop out that some of us resort to when faced with temptation: "I can resist anything except temptation." Or, for those of us who remember Flip Wilson, "The devil made me do it." These are cute and fun, but not what our faith would call for.

So, why do we pray not to be led into temptation? Do we want to be less than human? Perhaps we do. Temptation is a burden, without question, and one we frequently would rather be rid of—just as we often would prefer to be done with the difficulties, uncertainties, and the pains of our human condition whenever we experience unusual stress and hardship.

In the Small Catechism, Martin Luther explains the sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer in this way: "It is true that God tempts no one, but we ask in this prayer that God would preserve and keep us, so that the devil, the world, and our flesh may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great and shameful sins, and that, although we may be attacked by them, we may finally prevail and gain the victory."

Even Luther acknowledges that although we may pray not to be led into temptation, it inevitably comes. The force of the prayer, Luther argues, is rather that even though tempted, we may win the final victory over the temptation to sin and evil—that we will choose what is morally good and right from our Christian perspective.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus is led into the three basic temptations we all confront in our daily living, and Jesus faces these in most severe forms.

Physical Temptation

"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." Forty days! When Jesus came up against his temptations, he was alone, without the support and help of friends, family, disciples, or church. He was utterly alone.

"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.'"

The first temptation is the temptation of the body—a temptation that we meet, and Jesus met, in various forms. Here, it is in the shape of the instinctual and existential need to eat, to satisfy—in this case, the hunger of forty days. Jesus is sorely tempted to use his power for self-serving ends, to succumb as we too often do ourselves.

"If you are the Son of God," the devil says. The temptation was not only one of the body, but also of Jesus' obedience to God. There is a taunting invitation to prove who Jesus is by acting with power, though Jesus knows that by so doing he truly would deny who he was—one who came to serve and not to be served.

But the temptation was real. The devil tempts as though Jesus could prove his claims, and the suggested proof skillfully appeals to one of Jesus' greatest needs, his physical and pressing need for food. If the traditional site of the Mount of Temptation, near Jericho, is the place where Jesus spent those forty days, stones were everywhere. The hills of Judea are covered with stones the size of loaves of bread along with smaller stones that litter the landscape. He had to have been sick of looking at all that rubble, and tired beyond imagining of walking on them.

The devil's ploy is clever. It's contextual, and appeals in at least two ways. It's a double whammy. Jesus had to overcome instinctual desires—basic needs, as well as

his pride. Use of power in this way would have betrayed a pride in self that belied any ultimate obedience to God.

Spiritual Temptation

"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.'"

This second temptation is the temptation of the spirit. The devil asks Jesus to forego the pains, the trials, the sufferings of the ministry and passion ahead, and demonstrate once and for all his worth to God by testing God. Be quick about it, the tempter invites. Be spectacular. Get it over with in a flash of daring.

We too are tempted to take the easy route in matters of the spirit—to convince ourselves that spirituality concerns only religiosity and nothing more, an external display rather than a daily struggle of the heart, mind, and will. We are tempted to forego the pain, the struggle, the risk involved in a truly spiritual life.

Volitional Temptation

"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."

The third temptation is the temptation of the mind and the will. We might call it the temptation of ambition, of power, of gaining power without regard to the means. By overcoming this temptation, Jesus declares exploitation obsolete, as one author says, and offers a fresh definition of power as opportunity to rescue those who appear beyond hope. (Danker, p.56)

There is probably no culture in which people are so unabashedly encouraged to seek power as ours. From the moment we present ourselves as the best representative of our grade school class to the moment we try to convince our country that we will be the best possible president, we convince ourselves that striving for power and wanting to serve are the same. This fallacy is so deeply ingrained we rarely hesitate to reach for influential positions because we're certain that we do so for the good of the kingdom of God. What good can come from powerlessness? In this country of pioneers and self-made achievers, where ambition is praised from the first moment we enter school until we enter the competitive world of free enterprise, we cannot imagine that any good can come from giving up power or not even desiring it. (Nouwen, Leadership)

Jesus shows us a different way. He refuses to compromise. He affirms values that transcend the worldly.

Temptation - An Opportunity for Obedience

Temptation comes in these three basic forms—to our bodies, to our spirits, and to our wills—but it does come. We simply cannot avoid it. What we can do is to use it creatively. We can recognize that it is a blessed part of the human condition and treat it as a gift—and opportunity to flex our spiritual muscles.

Temptation, treated in this way, doesn't need to be avoided. It can help us to be directed more fully towards God. That's what Jesus does in each of these three instances. The temptations, threefold, to be centered on self and not on God, were turned into opportunities for a demonstration of obedience to the will of God.

Early in his massive systematic theology, Thomas Aquinas says that "the road that stretches before the feet of a man is a challenge to his heart long before it tests the strength of his legs." Lent offers us a time to remember that the most important focus of our lives is to become more Christ-like. With that focus, God can begin to use the very temptations that destroy so many to shape our lives into ones reflective of God's image.

In 2 Corinthians 12, we have an example of how God can transform temptation into an opportunity or a gift for us. Paul says that he has a "thorn in the flesh," something that bothered him deeply. "Three times I appealed to the Lord about this," he says, "that it would leave me; but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'"

As we engage our Lenten journey together, may our temptations become opportunities for experiences of God's grace—even if that grace is revealed in weakness or pain. And may God grant us glimpses of what our Lord endured on his own path to faithfulness, a path that leads to the cross. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord unto abundant life. Amen.