

Sermon for Lent I Year A 2020
It's Human to be Tempted

Wouldn't it be great to have the exactly right answer when temptation comes a calling?

Wouldn't it be great to speak as Jesus did in response to the very easily understood temptations posed to Jesus in this morning's gospel?

Actually, I believe most of us might know what the right words might be in the face of many things that tempt us.

It's more difficult to actually live out the resistance to temptation . . .

If you're like me, you're far more likely to live up to Oscar Wilde's confession: *I can resist everything except temptation.*

So how do we get through the great wilderness of temptations of life here on earth?

Perhaps you would agree, as I do, with the Civil War era philosopher Robert Ingersoll who said, "*No one can be out of reach of temptation unless they are dead.*"

This morning we are encountered by two stories of temptation—with, as I have no doubt you have noticed, two very different responses.

One is a story of surrender; the other tells a story of resistance and triumph.

We live in a world that emphasizes freedom, options, choices, and, above all values "no limits."

And yet, this freedom and this boundary-less existence comes at a great cost, whether we are aware of it or not.

What was the cost to Adam and Eve when they refused to honor the limits set by God their creator?

This introductory, primary biblical story draws a foundational picture of God for us:

A Creator God who puts or “plants” humans in a beautiful place, with a role or purpose, and provides expectations along with abundance.

Don’t we experience God’s provision for us, and God’s expectations as well even today?

We often here at Holy Trinity speak a lot about being blessed—and being “blessed to be a blessing” and yet, do we fully understand what being a blessing with and for others might require of us?

What is required of being a blessing, the prophet Micah tells us, is “doing justice” and “loving kindness” and “walking humbly” . . . this all sounds really good . . .

but living these words out generally requires resisting temptations of all sorts—

such as---resisting the temptation to seek revenge;

or resisting the temptation to exclude others

because they are different;

or resisting the temptation to take advantage of those who are weaker or poorer than we are.

It means resisting the temptation to have more at the expense of others . . .

but above all it means resisting the temptation “to play God.”

The truth is there are other voices in the world as well, voices that draw our attention to things that have the power to seduce us but not to bring life and bring it more abundantly as God does.

So what does the story from Genesis tell us about our foundational relationship with God?
What does it invite us to consider about our relationship with all of creation?

There are, of course, “serpents” that slither into our lives, voicing discontent, cynicism, doubt, and death. Out of that doubt and discontent are born many fears—and we are tempted to weaken and give in. How easy it is to give ourselves over to voices of despair rather than turning toward the voice of God who is still speaking to us—the God who provides not only a beautiful earth but a role and purpose for us within it.

In the gospel passage of Matthew, Jesus’ own role is twisted and distorted by the voice of death and cynicism. Yes, we hear that Jesus stands firm and Satan is driven away, but we do well to consider deeply a few things in order for this story to have meaning for us. To begin with, we need to take Jesus’ humanity fully into account. Because it is actually the appalling messiness being human—ours and the humanity of Jesus—that we grapple with in Lent.

Didn't we begin this past Ash Wednesday,
acknowledging with the imposition of ashes
that we will all surely die?

That with the words,

Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return
we confessed and acknowledged our mortality,
that our bodies will fail us no matter how cleverly
we attempt to preserve them with—
some, which have some limited life-saving properties—
and others, like Botox or cryogenics—
which seek to veil the truth of mortality.

With ashes on our forehead and the naked truth,
we began our Lenten journey to explore who Jesus is,
who we are,
and what our shared humanity requires of us now.

So . . . let's take stock of Jesus' humanity now.

The Jesus we encounter in this first week of our journey
is a 30-year-old carpenter
who has hardly the strength left to stand,
much less to tower over
the withered landscape of the wilderness.

As the evangelist of Matthew's gospel puts it,
Jesus is "famished" after forty days of fasting—
in other words, he is starving, he's ravenous
which means (as defined in the dictionary)
he is extremely hungry—even greedy—
for the satisfaction of what he needs and wants—
food and water.

So, take a moment or two now
and imagine this as best as you can:
Physically, Jesus is at the end of his strength.
Socially, he is alone and friendless.
Spiritually, he is struggling to come to terms
with his identity—who he is and who he is called to be—
as the glow of his baptism recedes
into a hazy, pre-wilderness past.

Could there ever be a better time for the devil,
the Tempter, to enter the scene?
And—let’s not imagine that this is some fool in red pajamas
with a tail and horns and pitchfork.
No, this is a far more subtle and sinister exploiter of weakness,
a brilliant questioner.
“Can you be like God?” was the savvy question
asked of Eve and Adam
posed in the lushness of the garden of earth.
“Can you take hold of a higher wisdom,
a keener knowledge,
a more divine humanity?”
It is a very human thing to feel
and hear the siren call of power over others.

Now the Tempter comes to the exhausted Son of God,
a clever inversion of those primordial questions ready on his lips
Can you be fully human? Can you abdicate power?
Exercise restraint? Work in obscurity?
*Can you truly bear the terror of what it means to be weak
and mortal and human?*

Have you ever wondered
what the big deal was with the devil's taunts?
Jesus was starving, after all.
Who would have cared really,
if he has zapped a rock or two into bread?
Not for anything, but God was supposed to be Jesus' protector.
God is supposed to be the omnipotent commander
of legions of angels.
Why would it have been sinful or wrong for a son to call on the
protective powers of his father?
After all, Jesus was the rightful ruler of the earth's kingdoms.
Who would have had the right to protest if he simply demanded
the worship that was his due?

Over the years, I have wrestled with such questions,
but I have come to understand
or perhaps only an inkling about the importance
of Jesus' humanity—
what I have come to see is that the Incarnation
had to involve genuine struggle.
Jesus' vocation had to come to him piecemeal
and interwoven with ambivalence and obscurity.
Why else would the devil have targeted his humanity as he did?

And yet . . . even as I am grateful to believe in a God who
knows human frailty, I still childishly want so often to look only
at Jesus' divinity—the certainty of it, the mighty, magical
promise of it—to overwhelm his humanity like a bright and
reassuring halo.

Why is that?

It's mainly because embracing Jesus' full humanity requires that I confront my own.

If those forty days in the wilderness was a time of revelation, a time for Jesus to decide who he was and how he would live out his calling, then here is what the Son of God, the Son of David chose: deprivation over power, vulnerability over rescue; obscurity over worldly honor.

At every instance in which he could have reached for the certain, the extraordinary, and the miraculous—to benefit himself—Jesus reached instead for the precarious, the quiet, and the ordinary.

Let's face it,
there's nothing easy about affirming Jesus' choices.
Indeed, sometimes I find them . . . appalling.
Who among us would not prefer the miraculous intervention, the dramatic rescue, the long-awaited vindication.
How often do we find ourselves echoing the demands of the Tempter:
Feed me!
Deliver me!
Prove yourself to me!

Do you, like me, sometimes experience the restraint and wisdom of Jesus offensive?

Jesus shows us that the key to resisting temptation is in our identity in relationship to God.

The three temptations Jesus experiences presents him with chances to be God-like, to mold the physical world to suit his momentary, personal wishes.

Satan tests Jesus to gratify all his own, very human desires, to defy his human physical limitations, to take change of the world and claim its splendor for himself --all faculties natural to God— but NOT to human beings.

But note this:

Jesus chooses to reject omnipotence, and chooses instead to be fully human living among us. In so choosing, he remains himself—truly human—and he lets God be God.

In the end, Jesus rejects the temptation to forget that he belongs to God outright.

Only God is worthy of our worship—he tells Satan and us—only God deserves our service.

It is after this firm answer—which is, if you didn't notice—the first and greatest commandment—that the devil departs and leaves Jesus (and us) alone.

Do we know who it is who made us?

Do we know who truly loves us?

Do we know who asks us not to forget that God loves us and will not abandon us in the wilderness?

Jesus' testing and temptations did not end in the desert.

Again and again he was tested and tempted.
“Avoid the cross,”
said his close and well-meaning friend Simon called Peter.
And, of course, there were those at Gethsemane who said,
“If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”
“Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”

We, individually and as the church, will also be tested
and tempted again and again.
As heirs of Adam and Eve,
we will fall short and forget who we are.
The great truth of the story of temptation and testing
in the Garden of Eden is that
God did not abandon Adam and Eve.
And God in Jesus the Christ will never abandon us.
God does not forget who we are—
his beloved sons and daughters.
He hears us and answers us as we pray—
Lead us not into temptation and deliver us evil.