

“How We Face Temptation”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Luke 4: 1-13

There are many examples around us of people succumbing to temptation. Our attention is drawn to high-profile examples: celebrities, sports stars, politicians, and the like. Drugs, sex, gambling, crime – there are any number of ways that we witness others giving in to temptation.

I read of one such example in *The New York Times* this week. The former mayor of San Diego, Maureen O'Connor, was in court this week to answer charges that she had stolen money from her late-husband's foundation which fueled her gambling addiction. Her husband was the founder of the Jack-in-the-Box hamburger chain, and his wealth was immense. It is estimated that over the last decade, Mrs. O'Connor wagered \$1 billion in casinos across the country. While that is not the amount that she lost, it does represent the extreme level of her addiction to gambling, and how she had lost the ability to resist that temptation (www.nytimes.com).

Temptation, though, is not just something which affects us as individuals. We can be tempted to make decisions which affect tens, hundreds, even millions of other people. In the movie, *Lincoln*, the president's priority is to secure passage of the thirteenth amendment to the constitution, the amendment which would abolish slavery. But to do so, it requires a herculean-effort to pass it through the House of Representatives, especially since it requires a two-thirds majority for passage. At the same time, there is a delegation from the Confederate States open to a brokered peace between North and South.

At a pivotal point in the movie, the president receives word from his commander in the field, Ulysses S. Grant, that the Confederate delegation is sincere in seeking peace. To do so would end the war sooner, and prevent more deaths. But to do so would also mean the defeat of the thirteenth amendment, which is on the precipice of having enough votes to pass. Lincoln initially is tempted to receive the Confederate delegation, but after further thought, he resists this temptation by telling Grant to hold the delegation outside of Washington, D.C., for an indeterminate time. Lincoln believed with all his being that the abolishment of slavery had to occur first and foremost, and by resisting the temptation to settle for something less, he impacted the lives of millions of Americans – for good.

Our scripture this morning is a biblical reminder that even God's own Son is not immune to temptation. It is also our reminder that in Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, we are given an example which reminds us whose we are in the first place.

It is immediately before these days in the wilderness that Jesus is baptized with the Holy Spirit by John in the Jordan. This is very important for the rest of the passage. Throughout these 40 days and final three temptations by the devil, Jesus

is not utterly alone in his struggle, but “filled with the Spirit” of God, so he might have the strength and courage to do God’s will in the face of such evil.

In each of these three temptations, we see Jesus saying no in the words of those who have gone before him. In the first case, the devil offers him something pretty basic and useful in Jesus’ condition: bread. Instead of continuing to be famished, Jesus could simply turn a stone lying beside him into bread, and satisfy his gnawing hunger. But in making this offer, the devil forces Jesus to defend who he claims to be: “If you are the Son of God, [then] command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”

How many times have we been tempted by our world to enjoy a little more bread than we know is good for us? We own so much, eat so much, consume so much, buy so much. It’s all around us, and we figure that a little more won’t hurt us. We often accept when we know we should say no.

Jesus responds to this temptation by reminding us of the time the Israelites were wandering in their own wilderness. They had complained and begged for food to sustain them on their journey, and God provided for their need in the manna each morning. But Moses reminded them, and Jesus reminds us, that “One does not live by bread alone,” but solely by the Word of God itself. Jesus says who he is by saying no.

Next, the devil takes him up to a high place, showing him all the kingdoms of the earth. There before them are all the kings, queens, rulers, governments, and emperors who hold the power of the world’s people. With this in their sight, the devil says, “Here it is: all the power in the world. If you will kneel before me, it will all be yours. What is your choice?”

Power is something we can certainly relate to. We admire people who have it, and yearn for the power others hold. Many of us just want the power to live our lives the way we want to. Too many times in history, individuals have sought too much unrivaled power, and it has ruined the lives of too many people. But power can also do a lot of good, and to hold that kind of power would not be such a bad thing.

Jesus responds to this temptation by reminding us again of the Israelites and their failed attempt at worshipping God. While Moses was up on that mountain all those days, they thought it might be good to build an idol which they could all focus their worship on. This, in turn, brought on the wrath of God, and prompted Moses to say, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” Power – in whatever form, good or bad – is not to be worshipped. Only God holds power, and all other power is futile in comparison. Jesus says who he is by saying no.

Finally, the devil takes Jesus to a specific and symbolic place – the temple at Jerusalem. The devil must think this will take the cake. Here is religion, in its purest form, and the devil wants Jesus to use it to prove who he is. “If you are the Son of God, then throw yourself down from here and let the angels save you, for that is what is written in the psalms.”

This too is something we like to see today. Our culture wants to see religion displayed in dazzling ways. We want to witness God’s grace through healings, polished performances, and large crowds of people filling our sanctuaries. If

someone's faith is real, then you must be able to jump off a cliff and be saved by the angels. Religion for us is just one more way to get the good things we want.

But Jesus says no, this is not the way to know who God is. The Israelites certainly tested their God throughout those 40 years, and Moses warned them not to put God to the test. Likewise, Jesus says, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test," and the devil finally departs him. Jesus says who he is by saying no.

Barbara Brown Taylor believes that this story from Jesus' life helps us recognize our own wilderness experiences: *Maybe it just looked like a hospital waiting room to you, or the sheets on a cheap motel bed after you got kicked out of your house, or maybe it looked like the parking lot where you couldn't find your car on the day you lost your job. It may even have been a kind of desert in the middle of your own chest, where you begged for a word from God and heard nothing but the wheezing bellows of your own breath.*

Wildernesses come in so many shapes and sizes that the only way you can really tell you are in one is to look around for what you normally count on to save your life and come up empty. No food. No earthly power. No special protection - just a Bible-quoting devil and a whole bunch of sand.

Needless to say, this is not a situation many of us seek. Most of us, in fact, spend a lot of time and money trying to stay out of it; but I don't know anyone who succeeds at that entirely or forever. Sooner or later, every one of us will get to take our own wilderness exam, our own trip to the desert to discover who we really are and what our lives are really about . . .

But it would be a mistake for me to try to describe your wilderness exam. Only you can do that, because only you know what devils have your number, and what kinds of bribes they use to get you to pick up. All I know for sure is that a voluntary trip to the desert this Lent is a great way to practice getting free of those devils for life - not only because it is where you lose your appetite for things that cannot save you, but also because it is where you learn to trust the Spirit that led you there to lead you out again, ready to worship the Lord your God and serve no other all the days of your life ("The Wilderness Exam," February 21, 2010, <http://day1.org/1756-the-wilderness-exam>).

The question is being asked: "Whose are you, and how will you show whose you are?" Jesus made it clear to the devil and to us that he was not certain things. He was not the Son of God because he needed material things, or earthly power, or even religious proofs. He was the Son of God because that is what God foreordained. And, armed with the Spirit, he solidified even more the fact that in the human act of death on a cross, we are forever lifted up to the divine place of his heavenly kingdom.

What will we say when the temptations of this world are offered to each of us? Will we listen to the Spirit in our hearts and act according to the voice of God in our souls? Or will we hear only the noise of the world, calling us to this or to that, and listen only for the affirmations of our culture, rather than the affirmation of God?

Take heart, know that God loves you, and affirm your faith by saying yes to the Lord your God. Thanks be to God. Amen.