

February 18, 2018

First Sunday in Lent

GOSPEL

Mark 1:9–15

The Spirit that comes upon Jesus at his baptism sustains him when he is tested by Satan so that he might proclaim the good news of God's reign.

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

¹²And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news."

There was a story about a police inspector who went "fishing" for burglars. He was assigned to investigate the theft of packages left in the hallways of office buildings for couriers to pick up after hours. But when the couriers came to pick them up they were mysteriously missing. So, the officer set up some dummy packages outside one of the offices, then he attached fishing line to the bottom of the packages. He then ran the lines under a door into another office where he waited. Not even 45 minutes after work that day he got his first bite, a big jerk came on the fishing line as it started to zoom out. Running out the door, the inspector caught a man who was ready to board the elevator. The man was booked for burglary, having fallen to the temptation of the big packages.

Yet another story comes from Florida, in which a backed up septic tank at a toll booth ended up getting three toll collectors in trouble. Repairman to the toll plaza septic tank found that the backup problem was caused by a sea of toll tickets in the tank. What that meant was that somebody had been flushing the tickets down the toilet and putting the toll fees in their own pockets. Three toll collectors were charged with theft. The temptation of the money had gotten to them.

Temptation. We hear a lot of stories about temptation in this season of Lent. Many people, in a practice of their faith, choose to give up something, for a lot of people it is food, and then they talk about how they are tempted to give in and break their vow. Lent is a time when we focus and reflect on our human sinfulness and our need for repentance and renewal, so inevitably this word "temptation: comes into play. The Gospel text for this first Sunday in Lent, retells the temptation of Jesus, as he is driven out into the desert. He is in that wilderness for forty days, which also is the length of our church season of Lent.

In the other Gospel texts, we know that Satan tempts Jesus three times in three different ways, in which Jesus could have gained power and control in an ungodlike way. However, Jesus resists it.

Temptation is an interesting human experience. Everyone who has ever lived passed the age of one has experienced temptation in one form or another. Even as Jesus taught us to pray there is a recognition of temptation in the Lord's Prayer: "Lead us not into temptation, or trial, but deliver us from evil." We all know the power temptation can hold over us and we have all at some time given in to it.

Sometimes we are guilty of simplifying temptation. Sometimes we are guilty of boxing up the concept so as to make it less than what it can be. Sometimes we reduce temptation to an act of trying to resist eating that extra piece of pie, or that dessert platter that comes around at a restaurant. Sometimes we think of temptation as biting our tongue, knowing not to say anything further, when we want to so bad. And while all of that is indeed a part of temptation, that certainly is not the whole of temptation. Temptation is much more than something we see coming and we try hard to resist it. Often the most dangerous type of temptations are the ones we find ourselves caught up in before we even know what happened. I've heard many people say: "I never thought it would get like this." Most people do not rise out of bed in the morning thinking that today, "I'll weave a pattern of relationships so difficult, that I won't know what to do next." The most difficult temptations in life are the ones we think we have control over, the ones that we do not see coming.

That is the trap and ultimate weapon that temptation uses. It comes at a in many sneaky and manipulative ways. See, there is a temptation to think that the school shootings in Florida do not affect my life. There is a

temptation to think that it could never happen here. There is a temptation to think that all the guns and violence in this country is just something we can ignore. There is a temptation to think that the numerous incidences of violence and mass shootings in this country is just a coincidence as compared to other countries. There is a temptation to think that I can stick my head in the sand and it will all go away. There is a temptation to think this is not a problem. There's a temptation to think that it requires no change on our part. There's a temptation to simply pray about it and know that nothing will ever change or happen until the next time that it does. There's a temptation to think we do not have blood on our hands. Sometimes there is even a bigger temptation to not even read or watch the news. I succumb to it. I am guilty.

What is the biggest temptation that we face in life? Which ones can we identify? Often, we are good about identifying it in others, but not in ourselves. Most answers can be caught up in issues dealing with priority and self-ego. The biggest temptation we often face is to fool ourselves into believing that we, or something we like to do very much, is the most important thing in the world. The Christian truth of the matter is the God, in Christ Jesus, is our center for living, and we are tempted in life when we make anything else more important than God. We are tempted daily by the things we encounter in our lives, the things that can entrap us or attract us to make different choices, to make that issue or object the ultimate center of our lives. Some these greatest issues and objects are: our jobs, our careers, our homes, our income, our possessions, our independence, even at times our own family members. It seems awkward to say that even our loved ones can be a source of tempting us to replace our God center, but that is often what happens in our day to day living.

This past Ash Wednesday, we kicked off the Lenten season with the theme “Thy Will Be Done.” We are reminded that we seek to do God’s will during everything we encounter in our lives because our other sources of our time and devotion do not hold up. Our money, our jobs, our vocations, our relationships cannot save us. When our own job comes to an end, there will be somebody ready to take it over. When any possession we own is taken away, or broken, we are left with nothing. It is God who is in ultimate control. It is only the promise of God, for the present and the future, that will endure all things. Our challenge becomes one of living our lives in attempting to keep God at the center of our being. It is a constant cycle to remind ourselves what is attempting to take over our ultimate priority. And we all continue in this challenge until our dying days.

When we hold to our priorities, when we keep God at our center, we know that nothing can outlast it. When God is at our center, we don't have to worry God forsaking on us. For like the Old Testament text of the rainbow, being a sign of God's covenant with us, we know that God's promises are everlasting and all-enduring. In our journey this Lenten season, may God help us in sorting through what begs to take over our center for living, what tempts us to make itself a god in our lives. Amen.