

“Can We Avoid Temptation?”

Genesis 3:1-7; Luke 4:1-13

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

February 25, 2018—2nd Sunday in Lent—Rev. Ronald Botts

The title of my sermon today asks the question, “Can we avoid temptation?” The answer is NO. That’s it! No debate. Temptation is always with us and around us. We can’t stop its appearance. But we can decide how we will respond, and that’s quite another matter altogether.

Last week we dealt with the same Gospel theme but in the hands of another writer, Mark. Today we hear again of Jesus’ time of temptation in the wilderness but through the eyes of Matthew, and find the scene is now greatly expanded. Mark’s brevity and Matthew’s detail are not at odds, however, and they both report the same outcome.

With this second hearing of the story today we can truly look at the incident from both the long and short of it. Each version speaks to us, but in a different way so that the two texts are complementary and not contradictory. Paired with today’s text is the Genesis account of the first man and woman in the Garden.

For a moment I want you to consider the number 40. We see it recurring over and over again in the Bible. In the great flood it rained 40 days and 40 nights. Moses fasted on the mountain for 40 days before descending with the Ten Commandments. For 40 years the Israelites wandered in the desert. And in this week’s Gospel, Jesus fasted and was tempted in the wilderness for 40 days.

Perhaps it shouldn’t be surprising then that we have just begun a season of the church year which lasts 40 days, from Ash Wednesday to Easter, not counting the Sundays. We know this season as Lent, and it is an ancient tradition. For the better part of two millennia the Church has begun the period by reflecting on the temptations of Jesus, just as we are doing today.

Temptation is a very real part of life; yet, it’s interesting to note that the Bible is not filled with story after story of human enticement and how it was overcome. In fact, there are only two major temptation stories, one in the Old Testament and one in the New. In the first evil predominates, while in the second good conquers evil. One story is from the Old Covenant, the other is from the New. One is from the time of preparation, the other is from the time of fulfillment. We’ve heard both of them read this morning.

The initial story tells of Adam and Eve in the garden. Into that idyllic setting comes evil in the form of a serpent. Now he is wily of speech and convincing in manner—the world’s first con artist. Man and Woman enjoy all the benefits imaginable in this Eden, and have a closeness to God that is just a breath away. Only one thing is denied them: the fruit from a single tree. This is what they presume differentiates themselves from God. This is the thin line, they reason, that keeps them from being on par with the Creator.

So the serpent concentrates on this single denial, for the two lack nothing else. Finally they become convinced that their greater gain will come by disobeying God, and so they eat the fruit. This, indeed, gives them awareness; but it's a realization they would have been better without. Blame the snake, but don't overlook that it is their decision. The serpent couldn't make them eat; he could only build upon a desire that they already had.

This story makes a theological point. It attempts to account for the distance between life in the ideal from reality as we know it. It also attempts to explain the separation between God and those of God's creation. Experience shows us that life is often hard and with it comes an underlying emptiness and estrangement.

Once temptation made its first inroad, it has been a part of the human condition ever since. Once temptation gains a foothold in our lives it pounds away like waves upon the shore, until our resolve collapses. Shakespeare recognized this very danger when he wrote in *Henry VI*: "Where the fox hath once got in his nose, he'll soon find means to make the body follow."

Our other story of enticement is found in the New Testament text. It is about three temptations that came to Jesus approaching mid-life. Biblical scholars estimate he was about 30 at the time of his baptism by John, on a life-expectancy chart of less than 50 years. This mid-way point proved difficult for Jesus, as I think it can also be hard for us.

Temptations are difficult at any life stage, but particularly so for persons in their middle years. It was evident in the lures which confronted Jesus in the wilderness. Today I want you to consider that they were not just his temptations, but they are the very same ones that beset us as well. Perhaps not so immense in scope, not so dramatically portrayed, but just as real for us.

These three temptations faced by Jesus are the powerful kind that often come along at about the halfway point of life, for people today around 40. They come at a vulnerable place when the passage of time seems to be speeding up, when opportunities for change are starting to be limited. There may be fewer chances for career, for love, for adventure, for recognition. They come at a time in life when it is harder to recover from a mistake. Youthful errors are often overlooked; nearing 40 we're not as often granted that leeway.

Matthew says, "Jesus was led by the Spirit in the wilderness where he was tempted for forty days by the devil. The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' [But Jesus refused.] Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. He said, 'I will give you their glory and all this authority. If you will worship me, it will all be yours.' [But Jesus refused.] The devil took him to Jerusalem, put him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here for you will be protected.' [But Jesus refused.] And when the devil had finished every test [and got nowhere], he departed from him."

Look closer at these three temptations. Think how they might appeal especially at mid-life. The first temptation is for security, for bread as abundant as the rocks. When you're young, you really don't need much. Nobody else is counting on you. You can take more risks and bounce back from miscalculations. With some age on you things are much more complicated. Your actions now affect others close at hand in a direct way. Responsibilities sometimes hang heavy around the shoulders. So, a sense of security in life is increasingly important.

The second temptation is for power, a way to control your world. As a young man or woman you had little authority. You had to invest yourself in an education where you were very much in a subordinate role. You probably started working in some entry-level position. Your first home was likely an apartment or even with your parents. When you did get a house it was a starter home. By the time we reach about forty we realize that we now have some power and influence over others. If a little bit of command is good, wouldn't a lot of it be better? Power can become enticing and tells us that it isn't how you get there that's important, only that you get there.

The third temptation is for privilege, a means to avoid suffering. You look at people older than you and you see pain and debilitation. How fearful a picture! You vow this will not happen to you. Temptation whispers in your ear to grab what you can in life and run, surround yourself with the best while you still have time. Think about yourself. Keep your money and time and energy close to you. Don't worry about others; that's their problem. Do everything you can to avoid suffering. Enjoy yourself.

Temptation is something we pray not to be led into; but sometimes we find ourselves there before we know it. There's a story about two Zen monks who were on a pilgrimage. In the course of their travels they came to a stream that was wide and deep. While they stood there hesitating, one of them observed an attractive woman in the same predicament. Immediately he made his way to her, boldly lifted her into his arms, forded the stream, and put her down on the other side.

When his companion joined him they resumed their journey. After walking half an hour in silence, the second monk turned to the first and said reproachfully, "Brother, it was wrong of you to take that woman in your arms and cross the stream with her. You know that we monks are not supposed to touch a woman." The first monk replied gently, but firmly: "Ah, but I put her down on the other side of the stream. You, it seems, are still carrying her in your thoughts."

Sometimes we find ourselves caving in to temptation before we even know it. Often it takes another to point out what is obvious to everyone else.

At the beginning of these 40 days of Lent, it is the right time to think about what tempts us most in life. And this applies to everyone of any age. It's an opportunity to examine those things that lure us and to assess whether they are for good or evil. This is a chance to reconsider the pathway we're on to determine whether it is taking us to, or away from, life's higher goals. We need to be honest with ourselves. Then we need to be honest with God: asking for forgiveness when appropriate, strength when necessary, courage where we're lacking, amends where needed, and change as required.

Jesus counteracts Temptation by affirming that his task is to declare God's message, not to simply fill stomachs. His destiny is to rule in human hearts and not to consolidate temporal power. His duty is not to put God to the test and ask for special privilege, but to accept the future for whatever it will be. At each turn he confronts the challenges of temptation, and then puts them decisively behind him.

Our temptations will never be the same as Jesus'; then again, each person's particular enticements will be different. We travel similar but singular roads. This I do know however:

the same power made available to Christ in his struggles is made available to us in ours. We will not have to go it alone. When we stand, we don't stand alone. God is present at every turn.

In the Garden Story humankind succumbs to the lure of evil; in the Wilderness Story it is evil which is defeated. Lent each year reminds us of our own options and choices and once again makes these two ancient stories very personal.