

Leave us not in temptation

A sermon preached by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the First Sunday in Lent, February 21, 2010.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. Luke 4:1

After his baptism, Jesus retreated to the wilderness to reflect on what God had called him to do. The Judean wilderness is one of the most desolate places on the face of the earth. It is dry and drab with no vegetation little sign of life save only a vast, unappealing and barren landscape. The only other place I have ever seen such desolate landscape is in the Badlands of South Dakota.

It is in the desert wilderness that Jesus undergoes his forty days of testing and temptation. You might wonder how he spent forty days alone without food or water. Those who were pulled from the rubble of the earthquake in Haiti barely survived in less than half that time. We don't know exactly how long Jesus was there, but the Bible uses the number forty to indicate a very long time. There were forty days and nights of rain during the flood. The Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years on their journey from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. However long it was, the experience helps Jesus to withstand the temptations he has to face. This is his basic training experience to prepare him for combat with the very real power of evil in the world.

Jesus' encounter with the devil is about power: who has it and how it is used. He experiences his own temptations because he is human and he has to undergo this time of testing before beginning his ministry. We can't expect to avoid facing trial and judgment. Jesus' example of strength to resist his temptations inspires us when faced with our own temptations.

In his famished state, Jesus is tempted to satisfy his own hunger by turning stones into bread. He could feed the world's poor and accomplish great good that would make him a world hero. However, it would be evil masked in the form of goodness and generosity because it would be at the cost of giving in to the power of evil.

His next temptation is to rule of all the nations of the world by becoming a dictator under the guise of a social reformer who would liberate all the oppressed people of the world. Since it would require submitting to the power of evil, he withstands that temptation because he knows that he obeys and serves only God.

His third and final temptation is to perform a stunt by safely jumping off a high pinnacle of the temple without being harmed. Such a feat would capture the world's imagination and gain him prominence and fame, but he doesn't give in. He has no intention of making a spectacle of himself. He again faces down the temptation to give in to the powers of deceit and corruption.

Jesus makes no excuses, no rationalizations. Having withstood his testing and temptations, he is ready to begin his ministry. He knows that he has the inner resources to withstand any temptation. Saint Ambrose, the 4th century Bishop of Milan, put it this way: "The devil tempted Jesus that he might be ruined, but God tempted him that he might be crowned."

There are those who deny the reality of evil, claiming that it is only the absence of good. Don't be fooled. Whatever form it takes, evil is very real, very evident and very powerful. It is not to be underestimated. The author C.S. Lewis reminds us that the forces of evil would want us to believe that there is no threat. Evil comes in many disguises and can even be masked as kindness and good intentions. We are tempted not because we are evil, but because we are human. There is no sin in being tempted, only in giving in to it.

What do we do when faced with temptation?

We must be sure in our knowledge of right and wrong, truth and falsehood. We must think before we act and know the consequences of our actions. Does it matter? Yes, it matters very much. It is all the more difficult in today's morally confused climate to know right from wrong and to resist temptation to rationalize. The 19th writer Oscar Wilde said he could resist anything, anything that is, except temptation. He rationalized that it is unhealthy to resist temptation because you only grow weaker in longing for what is forbidden. He gave in rather than fight his hedonistic personal desires with little regard for the consequences.

The Greek poet and novelist Nikos Kazantzakis' classic work, *The Last Temptation of Christ* scandalized those who couldn't imagine Jesus being tempted by such normal human desires as falling in love, marrying and having a family. The author makes the point that Jesus didn't give in to these normal temptations not because they were wrong, but because they would detract from his mission. God entered fully into the human condition through Christ by being born of a human mother, undergoing the baptism of repentance and withstanding all temptations.

All through his ministry there were those who tried to entrap Jesus by accusing him of disrespecting the law and being a political revolutionary and disturbing their way of life. He was not guilty of any of these charges and no one ever came close to proving it. He simply wanted to honor the spirit and intent of the law by loving God with all our heart, soul and mind and to treat our neighbor with the same love and respect we want for ourselves.

We must resist the temptation to love things and use people instead of the other way around. People are not to be used and manipulated. We can try to rationalize and think it doesn't matter, but the more we make excuses the worse it gets.

Do you find yourself envying those who are more fortunate than you? Do you try to blame others for your own mistakes? When you see dishonesty and injustice, do you mislead others by your silence? Being unfaithful in marriage and deceitful in business, cheating on your income tax returns, misrepresenting yourself, damaging the reputation of others, indulging in drinking and eating to excess and selling out your personal values for expediency are all temptations with which we are faced every day. They are very real. The more we give in to these temptations, the more we try to find ways around them. The child in us pleads that we can't help ourselves while the adult in us knows better. We must never use our inner child as an excuse for sin.

Each time we pass the test by resisting what is wrong and standing for what is right, we gain strength of character. Our character is our destiny. As we make this Lenten journey together, remember that Christ's victory is our victory; his example in resisting temptation is our reassurance not to compromise with what we know is wrong. We are made stronger in our resistance by holding on to what we know is right and true, just and honorable.