

Overcoming Temptation

Mark 1:9-15

February 26, 2012

I.

Some parts of the Bible are difficult to read. The message can seem obscure, and we have to slowly study the verses. The Gospel of Mark, however, is not that way. Mark does not waste words. The book is concisely written, and quickly moves from one point to another.

Mark's economy of language is evident in today's reading. In a few brief passages we covered Jesus' baptism, Jesus' temptation, and the coming of the kingdom of God.

But we already had a sermon on the baptism of Jesus last month, and we hear a lot about the kingdom of God throughout the church year. So today we will focus on the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. It's the only Sunday of the year that it is in our readings.

And one of the things we notice is that Jesus was in the wilderness forty days. By comparison, the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness forty years on their way to the promised land. We might be glad that the length of Lent is based on Jesus rather than Israel.

II.

And in addition to being Lent, this also is a popular season to take cruises, especially to tropical destinations. Perhaps we might think of our Lenten journeys as something like a cruise.

Our ship departed from port on Ash Wednesday when we acknowledged our mortality by affirming that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. And we will make some stops along the way as we worship and participate in our Lenten program at St. Thomas during the next six weeks.

We will return to port on Good Friday and see that the dust of our mortality has given way to the sure and certain hope of God's forgiveness. Then we will disembark and claim our bags on Easter as we embrace the promise of eternal life given in the resurrection.

Will it be a good cruise? Will we be refreshed and be closer to God? Perhaps we will experience a new spiritual blessing. Perhaps we will share our trip with others after we return.

This image of Lent suggests that while the next six weeks will be a time of introspection and self-examination, it does not have to be a dismal or gloomy experience. Although we are asked to consider our imperfections, we also can joyfully strengthen our faith by remembering how God in Jesus Christ can guard and protect us from the temptations the world places in our paths.

And the subject of temptation reminds me of when an angel reported to God that ninety-five percent of people on earth regularly gave in to temptation. Only five percent remained steadfast. This caused God to send another angel to confirm those numbers, and he got the same report.

So God sent a letter to the faithful five percent in order to thank them and encourage them. How many people here know what that letter said? I see you didn't get one either.

Today's Gospel reading illuminates the reality of those temptations. It is the classic story of how Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, and how Jesus remained obedient to God's will.

And one of the ways preachers sometimes use this reading is to hold up Jesus' temptation as an example for humanity. They might say that Jesus resisted temptation, therefore we also should be able to do the same. Very simple. End of story. Just do what Jesus did. Right?

Well, perhaps there's more to it. And today I would like to address two parts of the issue. The first is how Satan's temptation of Jesus is relevant to our own lives. The second is to consider the insidious ways in which temptation can work.

III.

The first part, how the Gospel applies to us, might raise some questions. Is it possible that this dramatic confrontation between Jesus and Satan was different from our situations?

After all, we are not sons of God or daughters of God in the way Jesus is the Son of God. We were not blessed at our baptisms with a booming voice from heaven saying that God was well pleased with us. We do not have supernatural powers and cannot perform miracles on our own.

So didn't Jesus have advantages we don't have? He was both divine and human. He was perfect and we are not. Why should we think we can resist temptation simply because he did so?

And Jesus also knew he would sit at God's right hand in heaven. He knew the trials of this world would be temporary burdens. While this does not minimize the horror of the crucifixion, Jesus could be confident that God would redeem his suffering.

So, wasn't everything destined to work out in the end for Jesus? He knew he would die, but also knew he would be resurrected. Resisting temptation for a while could have been natural for him.

But what if we view it from another perspective? Certainly Jesus knew he eventually was going to heaven. But don't we believe the same about ourselves? Don't we know that if we have accepted Jesus Christ as our savior, we also will inherit the Christian promise of eternal life?

And what if Jesus did know that his difficulties on earth were temporary? Don't we know the same? Don't we also believe that the trials of this world will give way to eternal joy in the next?

That's one of the points of this reading. Jesus' knowledge about his own destiny as God's son was much like what we know about our own destinies as Christians, and as God's children.

As a result, we *can* look to Jesus for help through temptation. He *is* the example to which we aspire, even though we cannot always live up to it.

IV.

This leads to the second question about the insidious nature of temptation. I enjoy newspaper comics. One of my favorites is called "Snuffy Smith," a story set in Appalachia that features a fellow who lives in a shack, makes moonshine, cheats at cards, is in constant trouble with the sheriff, and is known for stealing chickens.

The main character, Snuffy, sometimes is portrayed in a dilemma with a miniature Snuffy dressed as an angel hovering above one shoulder, and a miniature Snuffy dressed as a devil above the other. And both would be whispering in his ears, one urging him to do good, and the other suggesting mischief. We probably have seen that humorous image in other settings as well.

How often do we find ourselves in that kind of situation, and how do we respond? Do we listen to the little angel whispering in our ear, or do we listen to the little devil, or do we take refuge in our evolving Episcopal heritage and seek a middle ground?

Lets' consider how that little devil whispering in our ear might work. Temptation can appear in many ways; I will mention two. The process can start slowly and innocently, and grow into something very wicked. Or it can be a small thing that remains small but still corrupts. I have used the frog as an example of the first, and the fly as an example of the second.

It supposedly is true that if you drop a frog into a pot of boiling water it immediately will jump back out. But if you put the frog in a pot of cold water and slowly turn the heat up to boiling, the frog will remain in the pot and eventually die.

Gradual temptations operate in similar ways. Obviously, if Satan tried to trick you into something seriously bad right away you, like the frog, probably wouldn't sit still for it. But if it starts with just a simple thing, followed by another thing that builds on it, which produces more derelictions, then we can be like the slow-cooked frog. Before we realize it we are in really hot water.

Then come seemingly little things that show up now and then, but don't grow on us as in the previous example. They stand alone, and after having produced their ungodly fruit recede into the background for a while. Pride and vanity can be the results of these kinds of temptations.

An analogy might be a fly that lands in your soup at dinner. That fly's body mass would be but a minute fraction of what is in the bowl. Negligible. You might even remove the fly with a spoon and the soup still would look the same.

But you would know the fly had been there, and you might regard the entire bowl differently. You might even want a replacement. The small temptations we face work the same way. And giving in to them might not have any outward effect. No one else might know. But God knows. We know that he knows. And only Jesus Christ keeps him from wanting a replacement.

And we are urged to remember that Satan does not tempt us with unpleasant things. His tricks are wrapped in pretty packages with plausible explanations. They are directed to the things that matter most in our jobs, families, relationships, and our lives. They usually contain elements of truth wrapped in attractive lies, and are designed to separate us from God.

And we all are susceptible. Paul said in 1 Cor., "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to everyone" (10:13). Jesus said in Luke, "Temptations to sin are sure to come" (17:1). But he also told us in the Lord's Prayer to ask for deliverance from temptation (Mt. 6:13). And Scripture affirms that the Lord can protect us from it (Heb. 2:18, 2 Pe. 2:9).

V.

Several years ago a religious magazine did a survey on spiritual challenges faced by their readers. Then the survey identified when its readers were most vulnerable. Eighty one percent said temptations were more potent when they had neglected time with God. Fifty seven percent said that being physically tired made it more difficult to resist temptations.

On the other side of the coin, eighty four percent said prayer led them to find a way through temptation. Bible study was helpful to sixty six percent, and fifty two percent said being part of an accountability group or similar relationship was beneficial.

The point of this survey is that we cannot contend with Satan directly. He is too strong for us to overcome on our own. And we need not confront him as Jesus did. We have another option.

Jesus Christ is that option. All we do is turn away from the devil and toward our Lord and Savior. He's been there. He's done that. He understands. He forgives us when we fail, and strengthens us to succeed. And through the Spirit he can help us be what God calls us to be. *Amen.*