

Temptation Sunday
Deuteronomy 30:15-16, 19 and Luke 4:1-13
A Dialog Sermon written by Jan Edmiston and Rob Ross
February 25, 2007 – Lent 1

Rob:

Two weeks ago, in preparation for this sermon, we solicited your thoughts on temptation, which you wrote on these lovely green cards. We received around 30 responses, and they were full of thought-provoking views on temptation. We wanted to start today by thanking you for sharing your thoughts – temptation is not an easy thing to share about, especially not on a card in front of 100 people in worship, but we are glad you did. Also, if you want to follow-up on anything you wrote on the card, or anything you didn't, please know that there are people available in the church who you can talk with.

Now then - Jan will get to the biblical texts in a moment, but before we dive into Luke or Deuteronomy, I want to start off with two points about temptation. And the two points I want to make are these: **temptation is much more powerful than most of us wish to think, and most of us are much less powerful than we wish to think.**

One of the biggest movie events of the last few years was the *Lord of the Rings* Trilogy. JRR Tolkien always maintained that he was not a Christian, but this trilogy demonstrates many of the truths Christians also recognize, and one is the power of temptation. (A quick warning: this next illustration contains a spoiler, so if you have not seen or read *Lord of the Rings* and plan to and don't want to have the experience ruined, feel free to cover your ears). Temptation comes in many forms. In the *Lord of the Rings*, that form was a ring – a ring which conferred limitless power upon its wearer. Without getting too much into the background, the story is about a band of good warriors, who have been charged with destroying this ring in order to prevent an evil being from possessing it and doing great harm.

Throughout the story, person after person thinks that they are good enough and morally strong enough to resist the temptation of the ring, but person after person finds out that they were wrong. People start out genuinely wanting to destroy the ring, because of what the evil being could do with it. But, the people end up being corrupted and desiring the ring for what they could do with it. Perhaps the closest someone comes to resisting the power of the ring is when Gandalf the wizard refuses to carry or even touch the ring, because he believes it would corrupt him. Gandalf believes that the hobbits have the best chance of not giving in to temptation, because they are the most morally pure and good and so one of them carries the ring. At the climax of the story, only two of the original nine have made it to the volcanic mountain where they must destroy the ring. These two hobbits, Frodo and Sam, are followed by Gollum, who used to be a hobbit, but whose desire for the ring has warped his body and his spirit. At the culmination of the quest, Frodo is about to throw the ring in, but he changes his mind and decides to keep it for himself – in the end it proves too tempting. As he turns to take the ring, he is attacked by Gollum, and in the struggle, the ring falls into the lava of the mountain. And here is the profound part: no one, not even the hobbits, ends up having the moral strength to resist the ring. In the end, no one has the character to throw it in. Rather, it was destroyed because two people were fighting over who would get it.

Tolkien had a high view of the power of temptation. And he saw giving in to temptation as granting something else power over us – in his story, the ring is a character with a will – it even talks – and when people are tempted by it, they are seen as giving in to it, rather than choosing it. I think that most of us, assume the opposite. We assume that we are quite capable of resisting temptation. And when

we do give in, we don't see ourselves as giving power over to something else, but rather as simply making a choice of our own free will. Thus, we are not weak and overpowered; we are just rational utility maximizers, exercising our free choice.

Deep down, many people believe that if they really wanted to, they could resist temptation, they just choose not to. Have you ever thought that to yourself? If I really wanted to react calmly to being cut off on 395, I could. If I really wanted to stop staring at women or men when I am committed to someone else, I could. If I really wanted to stop putting people down, I could. If I wanted to, I could. I just don't want to, so I choose not to. It is an interesting line of reasoning, isn't it? The story about Jesus in the wilderness seems to side more with Tolkien than us. For, Jesus seems to really struggle and what is more, he is struggling with something evil and other than himself. Something other than the man Jesus or God is calling him to be less than his best self, and that something is very powerful. So, the question is, **“What kind of person will Jesus decide to be?”**

Jan:

Although this story in Luke is about Jesus' temptation, it's also about Jesus' identity. Look at the story immediately before this one (Luke 3:23-38). It starts with *“Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work.”* And then it goes on: *“He was the son (as was thought) of Joseph son of Heli, son of Matthat . . .”* This, of course, is a reference to the virgin birth¹, meaning that God's “real father” would be not be Joseph.

Now, we can read on and on until we get to the end (verse 38) where it says, *“son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God.”* As a human being, Jesus was God's child.

Now look at the story immediately before that one (Luke 3, starting with the first verse) and we find the story of John the Baptist – the one who baptized Jesus. And if we look at the last very verse in that collection of verses – John has baptized Jesus – and then (look at verse 21) *“when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven:*

***You are my Son, the Beloved;
With you I am well pleased”***

Luke *really* wants us to know who Jesus is. But the Devil throws doubt on all this.

Look again at your Bibles, at our story for today – verse 3: The devil said to Jesus, *“If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”*

If you are the Son of God. The temptation is not just about a very hungry man being tempted with bread. It's also about challenging Jesus to prove himself.

***If you're really the Son of God, let's see what you can do.
Let's see you take this stone
and turn it into hot, fresh, delicious bread.***

¹ Luke 1:34

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And then the devil implies *that he is someone he's not*. He implies that **his** power is comparable to **God's** power:

***To you I will give the glory of all the kingdoms of the world,
And all this authority.***

The devil said it belonged to him and **he** was the one who could pass it on to whomever he wished.

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And then – for the third temptation – the devil pushes the envelope even more. Again: *if you are the Son of God*, move God's hand.

Here's proof that "even the devil quotes scripture." He quotes the 91st Psalm. But the point is this: **the devil is questioning *who Jesus really is*, one more time, and then the devil is saying that *God can be controlled***. Do something to make God dive to the rescue. Throw yourself off the pinnacle of the temple and make God fly into action.

But Jesus knew that this is not how God works. This is not his purpose: to try to control God. **Jesus' role, Jesus' life's purpose was to serve God – *not to have God serve him***.

But here's the temptation piece: Jesus was God's Beloved. Jesus *could* have bread. Jesus *could* have all the kingdoms of the world. Didn't God want this for his only begotten Son?

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I'm reminded of President Clinton, after he left office and wrote a book about his presidency. And when asked why he succumbed to the temptation of Monica Lewinsky, he answered this way:

Because I could.

He was the President. He had power and privilege and the opportunity to "have relations with that woman." And he chose to do it **because he could**.

Jesus could have succumbed as well. He was a human being. He had the power and the opportunity. But that is not who he was born to be.

He was also the Son of God. **The heavens had opened and the Holy Spirit had descended upon him like a dove. And voice from heaven had announced it: He was God's beloved with whom God was pleased.** But Jesus had a laser-like focus on living his life in a way that was very intentional. He was all about living out his God-given purpose.

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Obviously, we are not Jesus. We **can** succumb to temptation. We can even be forgiven for it.

But this is not what we were born to do and be. That is not our life's purpose. In the words from Deuteronomy we heard earlier: the writer says that "*this commandment is not too hard*" for us. It's not too farfetched, that we would simply "choose life" – we would merely "choose" not to succumb to destructive things whether we are talking about chocolate or extramarital sex or sharing gossip about one of our co-workers. But it's not that easy sometimes. It takes time and intentionality to control our passions. It takes focus. A spiritual focus.

Rob:

Up to this point, Jan and I sound like we are disagreeing with each other. I started by saying that we are weak and temptation is strong. Jan continued by saying that we are able to resist temptation. Here is how the two fit together. Temptation is stronger than we think, and we are weaker than we think. But things don't have to remain that way. Things can change, with time and work. Lent can be a lot of things, and if you think you can resist temptation, one of the things it can be for you is a chance to call your own bluff. If you want to find out if you can really resist something, decide to try it for the period of Lent. Say, I am not going to gossip about co-workers for 40 days. Or, I am not going to watch TV shows with no redeeming value for the next 6 weeks. CS Lewis has a wonderful quote about temptation. He pictures temptation as a river in which we float. He images giving into temptation as floating down the river. It feels easy, because we just float with the current. Mindlessly going with the natural flow of our surroundings. When you resist temptation, you try to stand against the moving current. And like standing against a current, resisting temptation is difficult, and is a long process. It is not like you just decide once not to give in – you have to decide constantly, because there is always new water flowing past you. Lewis correctly observes that you never know how strong the current is, until you try to stand against it. Lent could be a time where you try to stand against it for 40 days, and try to find out just how strong the current is where you were floating. And maybe you find that you were right – that you are strong enough to stand up to temptation – if so, that is great! But, maybe you find out that you were wrong. What then? Well, then, you have to start slowly working on your temptation. And here are some ideas for how to do it.

Lewis' metaphor of the river of temptation can be pushed farther, for some places in the river have a stronger current than others. If you are first learning to swim, you would stick to the shallows, or find an eddy, where the current is not so strong, and if you lose your balance, you will be able to recover. It is not until later that you can go into the deep water. Also, if this is your first time swimming, you would want to have some others there to help you, in case you became caught up in the current. Even if you are an experienced swimmer, you would want someone who knows the river to come with you the first few times – because each river is different.

These tips for swimming can play out in lots of areas of life – including learning to resist temptation. If we decide today, after hearing this amazing sermon, that we are going to try to resist whatever has been tempting us for the period of Lent, we may not be best advised to go into the deep waters right away. For instance, if alcohol is your temptation, it may not be wise for you to go to Capitol City Brewery for lunch after worship to test your strength. You may not be ready for that current yet. Take some time to build up. Take a lot of time to build up. I am convinced that when people, "fall off the wagon" what has happened is that they experienced initial success and became over confident – then they swam out to the deep waters and found that they were not as strong as they thought they were yet.

Also, have other people with you – have people who know about your temptation, who have greater mastery over that addiction, and have them check in with you periodically during Lent. Others can

help you out of the water, if you slip under. But make sure that they know how to swim. Checking in with someone who has the same temptation may allow you to excuse each other, rather than hold each other accountable.

Listen, we should not be ashamed of having weaknesses. Part of being human is having weaknesses. We should not expect ourselves to decide today to beat a temptation and wake up tomorrow with the temptation beaten. But we do need to recognize our weaknesses when we have them, and work to strengthen those areas. That is a part of what Lent is about.

Jan:

Lent is a good time to work on strengthening ourselves against temptation. Unless we become aware of them, unless we discipline ourselves to remember our spiritual identities -- *who we are* and *whose we are* – our temptations will forever taunt us.

We live in a culture that often labels us according to our temptations. We have been – or continue to be – an alcoholic, an adulterer, a cheater, a glutton. And we do this to others. What's the first thing that pops into your head when you hear the names: Britney. Paris. Anna Nicole.

But in God's kingdom – miraculously – we are not defined by our temptations and our history of succumbing to them. We are defined by who we are *in God's eyes*.

We are God's children. We are identified according to the One who can actually help us conquer these struggles. And we are blessed, once again, with the opportunity to look to Jesus as our model for how to survive the wilderness. Once again, we find ourselves in Lent with the perfect opportunity to work on that laser focus on living a more intentional life in which we try to follow Jesus. This is our challenge and our adventure in these next days and weeks.