

“WILLING TO PAY THE PRICE: I – JESUS IS TEMPTED”

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Elkton United Methodist Church
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1st Sunday of Lent

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

Matthew 4:1-11

The other day, just before I was getting ready to write this sermon, I was scrolling through Facebook and came upon a really cute video. In the video there was a glass of wine sitting on a table and next to it sat a little dog. All of a sudden, you see a human hand reaching out to pick up the glass of wine, and just as quickly, the puppy picks up its paw and swats the hand away. It goes on for a while, and every time the human reaches for the wine, the puppy goes after it.

It made me chuckle as I watched it, but then when I sat down to write, that video kept coming into my mind, because well, isn't it a pretty good picture of what temptation is like? We want something and go after it, even when we know we shouldn't, in spite of someone or something telling us we shouldn't, trying to bat us away from it – like that puppy with the wine - if you will.

Well, friends, temptation is all over the place in the scriptures this morning, just like it's all over the place in our lives every single day. To be human is to face temptation every day, isn't it?

“I don’t need to stop at that stop sign. There’s no traffic around, and no cops around.” So you roll right through it.

“Oh, the cashier gave me the wrong change, she gave me too much. Oh, what the heck, they won’t miss it. They make a lot of money anyway.”

“Man, that is some juicy gossip I just heard, but I know I shouldn’t tell anybody. Oh well, I’ll just tell my best friend and make her promise not to tell anybody else.”

“No, I didn’t get that task done I was supposed to do. I’ll just tell them I was sick.”

Well, I could go on and on, but I don’t have to, do I? Because we all know that life is full of temptations – every day – big ones and little ones.

This morning we have the opportunity to look closely at how three people – Adam, Eve and Jesus faced temptation – and to learn from them, what to do and what not to do.

So let us begin at the beginning, with Adam and Eve. You know the story as well as I do. After God created the heavens and the earth, God created humanity – Adam and Eve. And like everything God created, he called them good. He loved them dearly and gave them a perfect world in which to live – Eden. He gave them everything they would need to live a full and faithful life.

And the only thing he asked them not to do was to eat of a certain tree. Which, of course, as soon as God's back was turned, is exactly what they did – they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Surely they rationalized their actions. "Why would God not want us to eat from this tree? It won't hurt. Who will know?"

Well, did you hear what happened as soon as they ate? They were filled with shame.

And when God confronted them later about it, how did they answer? Well, Adam not only blamed Eve, but in essence blamed God, because his response to God was that "the woman that you gave me made me do it."

And who did Eve blame? The serpent.

And what started on that day, that pattern of falling to temptation, lying, rationalizing, continues to this day in all of us.

Contrast that portrait of temptation with the one in the Gospel lesson – Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. Jesus has just come from, what had to be, one of the most spiritually uplifting moments in his life – his baptism in the River Jordan. When he came up out of the water, he heard the voice of God, "You are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased."

But as soon as his feet hit dry ground again, he was off to the wilderness of temptation, where he spent forty day and forty nights (which, by the way, is the origin of our forty days and forty nights of Lent). He goes off by himself to the desert, where he has to survive in the dust and dirt and rocks. Not to mention the fact that he fasted during that time.

So he was exhausted and dirty and starving, and that's when the devil came on the scene. Jesus was vulnerable in so many ways, and the devil pounced on that.

"Okay, Jesus," he says. "If you are who you say you are, if you are the Son of God, you don't have to starve anymore – just turn these stones into bread. Come on, Jesus, you can do it!"

You know, Jesus could have. But he didn't. Instead, he quoted scripture to the devil. "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

So the devil takes another tack. He took Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and said, "Okay, if you are the Son of God, throw yourself off of this pinnacle. If you are who you say you are, and God is who you say he is, he'll send angels to keep you safe." But again, Jesus said no, by quoting scripture, "It is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Well, the devil is not one to give up easily, which all of us know very well, so he tried a third time. He took Jesus to a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in all their splendor, and tried the ultimate temptation. "Hey Jesus, I'll give all of this to you – all of it – all you have to do is fall down and worship me." To which Jesus replied, "Get away from me, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord God, and serve only him.'"

And that seemed to do it – for the devil hightailed it out of there, and angels came and took care of Jesus.

Do you know what the difference is between how Adam and Eve faced temptation and how Jesus did? I'll tell you in a nutshell. Adam and Eve tried to be God, and Jesus was content to be human in those moments, letting God be God.

Adam and Eve got in trouble when they decided they could call the shots, that they knew better than God. Jesus went the better way by letting God be God and doing what God called him to do, even when it caused him to suffer along the way. He knew that in the end it would be okay – that God would make a way, which, in fact, he did.

And Jesus was able to do that, because he had armed himself ahead of time for the fight. Even before he entered the wilderness, he practiced "holy habits" – prayer, scripture, fellowship, fasting, silence – so that when the time came, he was ready to face whatever came his way.

Friends, we would do well to do the same. In fact, that's much of what we're called to do in this season of Lent. To practice holy habits so that we are armed for the fights of life, and especially, for times of temptation, and times in the wilderness – and so that we will remember that God is always with us through it all.

Writer Janet Hunt talked about it so beautifully when she wrote:

"This is why we are given Lent. This is why we have these forty days and forty nights. This time is surely meant as gift to us to enter into those practices which surely we will all one day need on that day we enter a wilderness not of our

choosing. Practices which will aid us in turning back evil itself with all of its empty promises which the devil so glibly makes. As Jesus did.

- To remember that the source of true life is not the bread we eat, but the Bread of Life.
- To learn once more that God is not one to be tested, but is our Companion, our Savior, our first and final Hope.
- To recognize that God is the source of all goodness and that when we bow – in our thoughts or our words or our daily choices – to any other god, we will always come up empty for such goodness is not theirs to give away in the first place.” (Janet Hunt, “And Suddenly Angels Came,” 2/28/17, Dancing with the Word)

So, my friends, I invite you during these forty days and forty nights of Lent to practice holy habits – to be intentional about your prayer time, practice fasting, spend time in the Bible every day, be in study and fellowship with other Christians, and be regular in worship. All of those things will strengthen you in so many ways, not the least of which is when you face temptation or times in the wilderness.

While you have to do this on your own, you don’t have to do it alone. Opportunities abound here in the church for praying with others – not the least of which are through our prayer concerns list in the bulletin or our email prayer chain. There are any number of ways you can be in Bible study and fellowship with others – Sunday School, Lenten Lunch and Learn, UMW circles, Emmaus groups, youth group and so many others. Use the Lenten devotional to be intentional about time in the word and in prayer each day. And come to worship every Sunday unless you’re away or sick. That’s vital to staying connected to God.

You know, I read a story this week about a man who wrote a letter to the editor of a newspaper and complained that it did him no good to go to church every Sunday. This is what he wrote: “I’ve gone for thirty years now, and in that time I’ve heard something like 3,000 sermons. But for the life of me, I can’t remember a single line from one of them. So I think I’m wasting my time, and the pastors are wasting theirs by giving sermons at all.”

Well, that letter stirred up all kinds of controversy, and for the next few days there were all kinds of letters written back. They kept coming day after day, until a man wrote this one that clinched it all:

He said: “I’ve been married for 30 years now. In that time my wife has cooked some 32,000 meals. But, for the life of me, I cannot recall the entire menu for a single one of those meals. However I do know this: They all nourished me and gave me the strength I needed to do my work. If my wife had not cooked these meals, I would be physically dead today. Likewise, if I had not gone to church for

nourishment, I would be spiritually dead today.” (James W. Moore, “Trust in God,” *There’s a Hole in Your Soul Only God Can Fill*, p. 27)

I like that, and not just because I’m a preacher, but because I know that each of us needs to be nourished regularly in and by our faith to face the temptations and wilderness experiences of life. And not only that, but because to be strong in our faith makes life better, we see life as the gift it is from our good and gracious God.

So friends, as we journey now in this season of Lent, let us be committed to holy habits – to prayer, time with God, Bible reading, fellowship and worship. So that when temptation comes, when wilderness times come, which they will, we will be armed for the fight, content to be human, and let God be God.

May it be so.

Amen.