

Order of Worship

First Sunday in Lent, February 21, 2021

WELCOME

Hello God, thank you for this day.

It's 9:03 and we need your help.

Guide us by your Holy Spirit to reach new people,

Connect us all through Christ's love, and

Empower us to love and serve others. Amen.

PRELUDE *Kyrie in D Minor, I. Plein Jeu* J.F.J. Benaut

CALL TO WORSHIP Psalm 25:1-10 UMH 757

HYMN 154 *All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name* CORONATION

SCRIPTURE 1 Peter 3:18-22

PASTORAL PRAYER AND LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

HYMN 2105 *Jesus, Tempted in the Desert* EBENEZER

SCRIPTURE Mark 1:12-15

MESSAGE Rev. Rebecca Voss

GENEROSITY, INVITATIONS and CELEBRATIONS

HYMN 269 *Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days* LAND OF REST

BENEDICTION

POSTLUDE *Kyrie in D Minor, II. Fugue - Grand Jeu* J.F.J. Benaut

Thirsting for God - TEMPTING Pastor Rebecca Voss

I can't help it. It's not as bad as what they do. As long as I don't overdo it. The devil made me do it. We've all probably said or thought a variation of at least one of these phrases. We give into temptation and in our defensiveness, we often claim either incompetence or overconfidence.

It is tempting, quite literally, to oversimplify temptation as an opportunity to eat, drink, do, take, or use something (or someone) that we shouldn't. This is all true, but today we're going to dig deeper for a well of understanding that will help us better recognize and resist the things that tempt us.

The biblical meaning of *tempting* (or *temptation*) is like the word *trial*. This is not a courtroom type of trial, but a trial that tests our character. Handling temptations well is like a soldier standing at attention, an athlete training, or a musician practicing. There is little excitement or attention given to all the behind-the-scenes work involved. Developing our relationship with God is like a gym for our souls and a rehearsal room for our hearts. We are better prepared for the trial and ready to overcome by thinking and doing what is right.

The tricky part is that we often do not even realize that there's tempting going on. The first of three characteristics of all temptation is a subtlety or deception that pulls us in and leads us to agree with or to do something. We are most prone to temptation in areas where we are gullible or weak. We think we know more than we do or can handle more than we really can.

The second characteristic is that we usually think it only affects us. We justify things by saying, "I'm the one who has to deal with a few extra pounds (or a hangover, or a debt, etc.)". Our very individualistic culture overlooks how what we think and do eventually affects others. Healthcare costs rise for everyone. Giving into temptation erodes trust, deepens stress, and fractures relationships.

Third and most importantly, it always affects our relationship with God. Every temptation is an opportunity for us to seek and choose what God says is best for us, not what we think we want in that moment. When we choose our fleeting wishes over God's long-term best for us, we are unfaithful in our relationship to God.

The Bible has a story of tempting near the very beginning of humanity. It's often framed as a story of Eve (and Adam) being tempted to eat ripe, delicious fruit and giving in. I wish I could tempt my kids to eat real fruit more often than a bag of fake fruit snacks.

So why would an appreciation for apples be the great sin that brought evil, sin, suffering, and injustice into the world? The story is not about fruit, and it's not about being denied good things. The temptation is believing what the serpent lies about in Genesis 3:4-5 (MSG): *The serpent told the Woman, 'You won't die. God knows that*

the moment you eat from that tree, you'll see what's really going on. You'll be just like God, knowing everything, ranging all the way from good to evil. We see how sin is rooted in our desire to have the same power as God. Freedom isn't free – it has responsibilities and boundaries. The first temptation story is ultimately about how our free will is a powerful gift from God, and how we use it can either lead us closer to or further apart in our relationship with God.

God always loves us and pursues a relationship with us. The experience of Jesus' Tempting in the Wilderness is the antidote to the poisonous traces left from the Tempting of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Jesus knew to see through the subtle deception when Satan manipulates God's word. After several attempts to tempt, the enemy is finally defeated. Where the first Adam (and Eve) failed the test and were banished from the Garden of Paradise, the Second Adam, Christ, ached the test on behalf of us all so we can be welcomed into Eternal Paradise.

Unfortunately, it's easy to lose the long view of an eternal relationship with God when facing times of temptation. It's tempting to get the "Flavor of the Day" every time I drive my daughter to and from her job. It's tempting to read another chapter or watch another episode instead of cleaning. It's tempting to stay warm under the covers instead of doing my morning physical therapy exercises. It's tempting to hold back an opportunity for someone we love because we don't want to lose them. How can we deal with times of tempting?

It's important to emphasize that being tempted is not a sin. As Martin Luther explained, *"Temptations, of course, cannot be avoided, but because we cannot prevent the birds from flying over our heads, there is no need that we should let them nest in our hair."* In other words, there will always be struggles that come at us. The test is to deal with them the right way so they don't become chronic problems.

There's no need to go out looking for temptations. It's foolish to pick a fight with the enemy. In Mark 1:12 it describes, *"And the Spirit immediately drove him [Jesus] out into the wilderness."* This is a reminder that even Jesus didn't need to seek out an opportunity to prove himself. We are not to put God to the test, but God is willing to lead us in the midst of tempting. 1 Corin. 10:13 says, *"No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."*

Verse 13 continues to show us how to follow Jesus' pattern: *"He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."* The wilderness of a desert certainly made Jesus thirsty, but this is also another example of how Jesus fulfills the Law and the Prophets. After God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt to give them freedom, they wandered in the wilderness for forty years after failing every test of trust in God. Now Jesus is in the wilderness for forty days on our behalf in order to demonstrate what true reliance on God is like. Like our Lenten theme reminds us, we are thirsting for God, and nothing but God will quench our deepest longings.

"But wait!", you say. Why did Jesus teach us to pray in Matthew 6:13, *'Lead us not into temptation'*? This seems to contradict everything I just preached about how tempting times are opportunities to choose to trust and obey God and develop spiritual strength. There are scholars who interpret this differently, but I'm most convinced that the translation is easier to understand with the next line: *'but deliver us from evil'* (literally, it says, "the evil one"). Eugene Peterson transliterates it in the Message as *"Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil"*. I would translate the whole sentence, "Lead us away from evil in times of temptation." We will deal with tempting times throughout our lives, but we can turn to God to lead us in resisting evil and injustice (and too much ice cream) in whatever forms of temptation they come to us in.

So much more could be shared about how this relates to everything from addictions to apathy. Temptations are often not even recognized until we see them in the rearview mirror, and we realize we gave ground to evil. It does not matter whether we consider it to be major or minor. Our thoughts, words, and deeds affect ourselves, others, and our relationship with God more than we want to admit. It does not matter how much responsibility we want to take for our choices. We have been gifted by God with a free will and daily opportunities to use our time and circumstances to be faithful or unfaithful to God. Thankfully, we can receive God's forgiveness for what is past, and God's strength to overcome times of tempting in the future. This Lent and beyond, let us recommit to our baptismal vows to "accept the freedom and power God gives to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves". As we do, God will strengthen and fill our thirsting souls. Amen.