

## **“Forty Days of Temptation”**

Mark 1:9–15

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Lent

5 March 2006

the Rev. Todd R. Goddard, pastor

[Zion West Walworth United Methodist Church](#)

### Mark 1:9–15

<sup>9</sup>In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup>And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup>And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” <sup>12</sup>And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup>He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

<sup>14</sup>Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup>and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Prayer.

Our gospel lesson for this morning cause me to reflect upon temptations– how Jesus faced temptations, how we face temptations, and some helpful strategies regarding how to overcome the temptations that we inevitably face throughout our lives.

Four thoughts.

1) Treat temptation with respect. “Oh, mom. I won’t let that happen to me” just doesn’t cut it in the adult and seedy world of temptation and sin.

It would be naive to dismiss temptations as something trivial or unimportant. But here are the facts: Jesus faced 40 days of intense, consecutive, severe, potentially catastrophic temptations. These efforts were at the hand of the devil himself, in the wilderness immediately following Jesus’ baptism and right before he began his public ministry. What a way to start out in ministry!

Jesus knows we face temptations, too. That’s why he included the subject in the prayer he teaches us ... “and do not bring us to the time of trial,

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but rescue us from the evil one.” (Matthew 6:13) Temptations are very real. They can become so obsessively destructive they can take your life. In teaching us this prayer, Jesus is giving us an essential tool to fight back against temptation – the power of prayer.

We have been given the permission to petition God, to ask for help, that we not be led into temptation. This permission to wield the power of prayer is an essential spiritual tool given to us and available for our use.

In some respects, temptation is like fire. It is intriguing to look at, but don't reach out and touch it. Temptation can capture our eye, our attention, even our imagination. But as soon as temptation is converted into behavior, we find ourselves beyond the point of no return. We touch the flame and we are burned.

Temptation is nothing less than the work of the evil one. Like it or not, the force of evil has to be reckoned with.

2) Preemptively and proactively deal with temptations.

The easiest way to avoid temptations is to not allow yourself to be placed in a position where you would face temptation in the first place. In other words, don't play with fire. Neither should we go looking for matches or a lighter.

Tempted to commit adultery? Don't go looking, flirting, or trying to find opportunity. Tempted to steal some money? Don't put yourself in a position to count money, deposit money, or keep track of money. Tempted to fake a resume? Create a resume with someone who knows you, who will hold you accountable, who won't let you obscure the details. Tempted to drink? Don't go to a bar. Tempted to overeat? Don't go to the buffet.

Generally, avoidance is not a healthy approach to life's problems. But avoidance works when it comes to temptation. Avoiding temptations preempts them before they can even begin.

The best time to face a difficult issue is not when confronted by a moral crisis. The best time comes well before, when the issue can be thoroughly thought out in advance, when the temptation can be avoided if at all possible. And when it can't be avoided, then we will have the advantage of an aggressive, proactive game plan. Strategy will have already been created

and resources will be prepared to offer support. Then we will have the benefit of a well thought out and articulated moral and ethical framework to help shape and sculpt future decisions.

For example, the best way to address the hard issues of the day is around the family table, when you have the benefit of wisdom and experience. The best approach to moral dilemma is to talk about them in Sunday school classes and at church. Who better to influence our beliefs and values than our mentors, teachers, and pastors?

3) Reframe the question. The best approach to many difficult issues, the most luring temptations, is to reframe the question.

Superficially, this may be no consolation to a parent who had a son killed in war or in his patrol car. The old saw making comparison between an optimist and a pessimist, a cup of water that is half full or half empty, may have no meaning to the junkie or alcoholic whose future holds divorce, death, jail, and broken relationships.

To the business owner who risked everything only to find bankruptcy at the end of the rainbow, reframing the issue may appear shallow and cold. To the patient with a new terminal diagnosis walking away from the doctor's office or laying in a hospital bed, anger may thwart every effort to assure or find comfort.

In his letter to the church in Rome, the apostle Paul observes "we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28) All things, he says. Not some things. All things work together for good.

Even temptations have benefits, if only we have the courage, strength, foresight, and objectivity to reframe temptation into a more helpful form. "Temptations can be beneficial?" you ask with skepticism.

Consider the power of witness. "I've been down the same road your are traveling. I overcame the same temptations that you are now facing. If God is able to grant me success, God can show you the road to victory, how to overcome temptations, too."

Consider the confidence that comes with experience. "I've beat this temptation before. I know I can beat it again."

Consider the possibility of revelation; that is, God is using temptation to reveal something new to you, if only you reframe the issue, if only you open your eyes, and see what is staring right back at you!

A while back I recall hearing of a ministry that was in search of funding, looking for financial support. The participants made the effort to organize and plan in great detail – outlining plans, goals, objectives, all the necessary groundwork for launching something new, with the hopes of attracting investments. No support came.

Many would have considered the effort a failure – “the glass was half empty after all.” But there were a few stakeholders who were well tempered by the Spirit, who knew the benefit of reframing the issue, and who understood the value of patience, persistence, and faithfulness. The temptation to quit was very strong. But it did not overwhelm them.

The plan that had led to failure was picked out of the coals of the fire, dusted off and reworked. The necessary preliminary work that went into the failed attempt became the foundation of something new – something new that was accepted, funded and grew to fruition. Without the failed effort, the new thing God was creating would have never been revealed.

Indeed, all things – including temptation – can work together for good for those who love God.

4) God gives us the power and ability to overcome all temptation, if only we trust Him.

Ultimately it is a trust issue. Do you trust the Lord sufficiently that you can stand confidently opposed and unyielding to temptation?

My confidence and trust comes from a lifetime of God’s faithful protection. God has watched over and kept my life, safely and securely, every one of my days. I have been given sufficient grace and support to stand firm against many temptations. In fact, as I look back over my life, the only times that I’ve yielded to temptations and have been burnt by sin have been those times when I’ve allowed pride, ego, or money get in the way of my relationship with Christ.

In every occasion, God supplies us with sufficient grace, adequate resources. Either you come to trust this, or you don't. It isn't magic. It isn't a miracle. It is simply a recognition of the way that God treats us.

When God made covenant with Abraham to be our God and that we would be his people, God promised us his support to stand firm against temptation and sin. God has been faithful to us, even when our faithfulness has ebbed and flowed. God sent us his Son, Jesus, to be our rock, our sword, our shield. God gives to us his Spirit, the Holy Spirit, to be our every present help and guide.

... if only we place our trust in the Lord.

Though it is painful to hear of how Jesus endured 40 grueling days with the devil, and though it is somber and humbling to endure our 40 days of Lent, these are helpful spiritual issues. All things do work together for good.

Dear people of God, beloved members and friends of Zion, you are not bearing your burden of temptation alone. Christ is by your side. Bring your trials forward when you come for Holy Communion. Lay them at the altar. Leave them behind for God to dispose of. Leave your burdens behind and taste; taste all the goodness that Christ is giving to you.

The word of the Lord, as it has come to me. Thanks be to God. Amen.