

Lent I
Reformation, Media
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(Take a basket around and offer people a piece of chocolate, some potato chips, cookies, etc.)

Lead us not into temptation. Not exactly a phrase that would work very well in a capitalistic culture, where we are tested and tempted every single day – according to Google and other researchers, we are subject to between 1500 and 5000 advertisements a day, and we notice at least 75-100 a day. Any parent who has kids pleading for sugary cereal or wanting every new toy on the market at Christmas time can verify those statistics.

But it's not just the voices of excessive food or credit card spending that we need to worry about. All kinds of voices call us – some from inside and some from outside and the more alert and alive we are the more clamorous our lives. As Tiger Woods said in his statement on Friday, fame and fortune allowed me to give in to all of the temptations that surrounded me – I didn't think the rules applied to me. The list of successful people, from politicians to business executives to religious leaders who have had to make that confession is long. And while our personal stories may not be as dramatic or as public, the truth is that all of us have succumbed to temptation.

So every year, as we begin our Lenten journey, we re-tell the story of Jesus being tempted. Still wet from his baptism, he discovers what we all know – life after baptism is not free from testing and temptation. Now there are some interesting things about

temptation. First of all, temptation is NOT coercion – you can’t make someone do it. Temptation is enticing a person to do what they want to do. It is not a problem of knowledge – we KNOW what is good and bad, what is right and wrong – IT IS AN ISSUE OF OUR WILL. Adam and Eve in the garden – when the serpent first offers the fruit of the forbidden tree, they say “God said we should not eat that fruit.” But the tempter begins to weave the fabric of rationalization – God doesn’t want you to be like God. And the willful humans add their own rational – it is pleasant to the sight, it appears to be good to eat. CRUNCH. As quick as the credit card rings up a sale or the compromise of the relationship is accomplished, we follow the tempter.

Jesus’ temptations are not trivial. Hungry from 40 days of fasting, he is tempted to use his powers to turn stones into bread. Prepared to begin his ministry, he is tempted to have all the kingdoms of the world, immediately. And, in our get-it-all-right-now world, we can understand that temptation. And finally, he is tempted to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple trust God’s promise to save him. That’s another thing about temptations – they are not necessarily bad things. Later Jesus will feed 5000 people, miraculously creating bread; God has already promised that Jesus will someday rule over all the kingdoms of the world; and later, Jesus will have the opportunity to trust God’s ability to save him. They are not bad things in and of themselves, they are good things at the wrong time and for the wrong reason.

Temptation is a battle of the will – It’s like children want to do what they want to do, when they want to do it – But sometimes their will conflicts with what parents want them

to do. We know how difficult willful children are. We’ve seen it in our own children and their tantrums – we’ve seen it in supermarkets or stores. What they want is not always bad, but it is the wrong time and for the wrong reason. A battle of wills. That’s what Jesus and all of us face with temptation. A battle of wills. Who do we trust? What voice will we listen to? Who will we follow? God’s will or the will of the devil?

And here’s another thing about temptation – The devil is the Greek translation diabolos and in Hebrew is SaTaN – which means the adversary and which in the Hebrew scriptures are primarily other people, not supernatural beings. Most of the time our temptations come from other people. It becomes a test of our resolve. Will we follow what we know is right, the values God has established as good for us, or give in to the lure of the boring, banal voices of mass culture, fueled by 5000 ads a day and years of brain-bending messages that say all that matters about a job is salary and status, or all that matters in life is accumulation.

Teachers here will tell you that, despite what the students think, a test is not designed to be flunked. A test is to discover what you know and what you can do. It reveals where you need to work and grow. So in the Bible, sometimes God will test us – He tells the Israelites as they travel on the Exodus to only pick up enough manna for one day – trust that God will provide for you tomorrow – and learn that we do not live by bread alone. Jesus learned the lessons. God tests us to make us stronger, better; but Satan, our adversaries test and tempt us to destroy our self-esteem, erode our faith, and make us dependent on their life-sapping, loyalty-turning, value-compromising schemes that put

them in control of our lives. I don't care if it is drugs, or out-of-control spending or inappropriate relationships or unethical business practices – whatever compromises our values, destroys our integrity, erodes the trust others have in us, or undermine our self-worth are NOT of God. It's of diabolos – Satan.

When the final testing came for Jesus, he was lifted up not on top of the spire of the temple, but on top of the cross and the adversaries, the crowd around him shouted out, “if you are the Son of God, come down from there and save yourself.” No miracle kept him from dying. In the final test, he had to trust God to raise him up to new life.

Our life after baptism will not be without trials and temptations, we are constantly being tested about who to trust, whose will to follow. We can pray, lead us not into temptation, but it is not God we have to worry about. God may test us, but only to make us stronger. It is SaTaN, diabolos, our adversaries, we have to worry about. Their demonic powers seek to destroy us and will tempt us over and over again.

Although the temptation story does not offer ethical instructions that cover every eventuality, it does describe the perennial ethical challenges that Christians face: the temptations to forget one's baptismal identity, to attempt to use one's religion for personal gain, to try to be successful rather than faithful, to be dazzled by the riches of the world, to make compromises where one is called to stand firm, and to avoid the path of sacrifice and suffering.

Tiger said it – I neglected my faith. Whether it is Buddhism or Judaism, or Christianity, it reminds us that while temptation never ends, neither does God’s protecting care. God is always there, helping to motivate us to do what is right. There is nothing moralistic or sentimental about this truth. It means for us simply that we must be careful with our lives, for Christ's sake, because it would seem that they are the only lives we are going to have in this puzzling and perilous world, and so they are very precious and what we do with them matters enormously. Everybody knows that. We need no one to tell it to us. Yet in another way perhaps we always need to be told, because there is always the temptation to believe that we have all the time in the world, whereas the truth of it is that we do not. We have only a life, and the choice of how we are going to live it must be our own choice, not one that we let the world make for us.

Amen.