

**First Presbyterian Church, Wausau**  
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**Tempted and Tested – February 14, 2016**

Four minister friends were spending some vacation time together at a cabin in the woods. One evening while they were chatting out by the campfire, someone asked the group, "What is your greatest temptation?" The Catholic priest, a bit embarrassed, said, "Well, sometimes I do like to appreciate feminine beauty, and once I even bought a copy of the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Edition." The others chuckled a bit, and next the Baptist pastor said, "Well, mine's worse. Occasionally I've been known to enjoy the fine taste of a smooth Kentucky bourbon." A bit more laughter and then the Presbyterian spoke up, "Well, I hate to admit it but mine is worse than that. Every so often I do like to spend a day down on the riverboat casino and try my luck." After the laughter died down, the Methodist finally said, "Mine's the worst of all of you. You see, I love to gossip...and if you'll excuse me, I have to go make a few phone calls."

Temptation. It comes at us in a variety of forms. It can be as simple as craving a piece of candy when you're trying to count calories. Or it could be a little more serious, such as taking some creative liberties on your income tax return. It might be putting off an important deadline or spreading rumors about a neighbor or even plotting revenge against someone who has wronged us. All human beings face temptations in their lives. And Jesus was no exception.

This morning as we continue our study of Luke's gospel, we come to a well-known story. After Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove, and a voice from heaven proclaimed, "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased." The ministry of Jesus was about to begin, and the words of God from the heavens told Jesus, "It's time to embark upon the path to which you have been called." And so following this heavenly announcement, the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, the desert, for a time of preparation. A time for him to lay the groundwork for how his ministry would take shape.

40 days in the desert. 40 days in this desolate wilderness. Fasting and praying. For those familiar with the Old Testament, this is reminiscent of the time when Moses spent 40 days on Mt Sinai without food while he received from God the commandments for Israel. This also reminds us of the story of Elijah's 40 days in the wilderness as he traveled to Mt Horeb to meet God. And then there's the 40 years that Israel wandered in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land.

This brings us to the 40 days of Lent – this period of time which began on Ash Wednesday this past week and leads us through of time of self-examination and preparation as we await the coming Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ and his resurrection on Easter morning. It is during this season of Lent that we join with Jesus on this path of introspection. In all these situations, the number 40 represents a time of either testing or preparation for something big.

As we look at this story, the goal for us is to discover its relevance to our lives today. We can see that because Jesus himself was tempted, it shows us that he was fully human like us. He can relate to us and our own struggle with sin, because he himself faced temptation and had to respond to it.

In the passage immediately preceding this one, Luke outlines the genealogy of Jesus and takes the genealogy all the way back to Adam. Luke is reminding us that Adam was the first Son of God. Adam was tempted by the serpent, and he failed the test. Adam is the disobedient son.

Now Jesus, in Luke's gospel, has been called the Son of God, prior to his birth and at his baptism. He has been claimed by God. And now, as he is about to embark on his ministry, the question is, what kind of Son will he be? Will he succeed where Adam failed? Where each of us fails. Will Jesus be the Obedient Son?

19<sup>th</sup> Century preacher and poet, EH Chapin wrote, "Temptation cannot exist without the concurrence of inclination and opportunity." (from *Living Words*) In other words, for something to be a temptation, it must be both desirable and attainable to the one being tempted. In the face of temptation, we are confronted with a choice. Succumb or resist. And this is the test – how will we respond to the temptation – what choice will we make?

In this story we are told that Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness. 40 days without food, without friends, without the comforts of home. He was weary, famished, alone – his defenses were at their lowest. His ministry had not yet taken shape, and the possibilities ahead of him seemed endless.

The devil approaches Jesus and the very first temptation is a simple one. It focuses on his hunger, a basic human need. The devil begins, "If you are the Son of God, why not make yourself some bread to eat?" The devil is not questioning the identity of Jesus. He knows exactly who Jesus is. But he goads him to use his power to feed himself. "See these stones here? It would be nothing for you to change them into bread." While the Israelites had wandered in the desert after their Exodus from Egypt, they griped about the food they had to eat. They weren't satisfied with the manna God had given to them. They questioned God's ability to provide for them. This temptation is a parallel to that.

Jesus has the power to see to his own needs. He doesn't have to rely or depend upon God. Yet Jesus responds with Scripture, "One does not live by bread alone." Those words had been spoken by Moses as Israel stood on the border of the Promised Land, and it refers to the belief that God will provide for all our needs. Here the devil tempts Jesus to put his own needs before

the needs of the world. But that is the very reason Jesus had come to be with us – he came FOR us, not for himself. So this first temptation really focuses on putting self over others. Being self-serving is common struggle for all people.

In the next temptation, the devil offers to Jesus all the power and the wealth of the world. All Jesus has to do is worship the devil, and it will all be his. This is a seductive thought. Imagine if Jesus were in control of all the worlds' nations. There would be peace, justice, mercy and love. If Jesus were the political ruler of the world, imagine how life would be different. "Put me first in your life," says the devil, "and all this can be yours!" But Jesus responds, again with Scripture, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."

The lure here is for easy power and cheap authority, at the destructive cost of succumbing to evil. Jesus, as the Son of God, already has all power and authority given to him by God. Jesus is already a King, but it is in God's Kingdom. His path is not one of political fame and fortune. His is the way of humbleness and submission. The devil offers an invitation for Jesus to compromise his faithfulness to God in order to gain worldly success. The temptation here is to put aside righteousness for worldly ambition. To put aside the path of God to follow the path of the world. Again, this is typical type of temptation any of us might face. Our worldly culture constantly beckons us to follow its ways.

In the final temptation, the devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem, to the top of the Temple. The devil dares him to prove that he is the Son of God. "Why not start your ministry with an awesome deed of power? Who could deny your identity if they witnessed this incredible miracle? People need tangible and visible evidence to believe things. Here's your opportunity to really grab their attention." The devil knows that Jesus would be protected if he put himself in danger, and he even uses Scripture to back up his point.

Jesus responds again with Scripture, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." God already has a plan for Jesus' life. It is ironic that Jesus will actually save the world through the giving of his own life. He will face this temptation once again in the Garden of Gethsemane. And in that instance, like here, he chooses to follow God's will instead of following his own. The temptation here is to follow the easy path, not the Godly path of giving of oneself.

Three temptations – to be self-centered by putting our own desires first, to compromise God's way with doing things according to the world's standards, or to choose the easy road over the road of self-sacrifice. When we look at the temptations of Jesus in this light, they become similar to the struggles that we face on a daily basis.

Temptations are not always blatant in how they come to us. Our world is filled with various shades of gray. And because of this, it is sometimes difficult to know what is right and what is wrong. The waters are muddy, the issues are confusing. Does the good of the larger group outweigh the good of the smaller group? It is okay to stretch the truth in order to protect someone's feelings? Is it all right to hedge a few dollars on our tax forms if everyone else does it? Is it okay to steal from the rich to give to the poor? Is it all right to support a company that exploits its workers in third world nations? The questions of the temptations are also the questions of ethics. How do we deal with the issues of global warming, the death penalty, or war? The lesson about temptations is not simply personal in nature, but the church as a community has to face it as well. What should our answers be? How do we respond?

These three temptations that Jesus faced have given us some questions to ask that hopefully will aid us when we are trying to determine right from wrong. Question one - Is the decision I am making one of self-centered desire? Question two - Am I compromising God's way for worldly ambition? And question three - Is my decision one that will lead me down the path of Christian service, or am I choosing the easy road? If we ask ourselves these questions before making decisions regarding the choices we make and the paths that we take in this life, we have a better chance of determining the proper course of action, and of passing the test.

But in order to do this faithfully, we must maintain a strong foundation in our relationship to God through Christ. And this comes through an intent of the will, to choose to follow God, understand God's ways, and live our lives in accordance. This isn't easy, and we face temptations to fall away, to be disobedient, like our great-great-grandfather Adam.

But remember, while Jesus was in the desert fasting, praying and preparing for his ministry, the Holy Spirit was with him the entire time. He didn't have to face the temptations of the devil alone. And neither do we. The Holy Spirit guides us as well. The shades of gray in our lives don't have to be so daunting to us. Sometimes it's as if we are living in a wilderness, with dark shadows and murky visions attempting to pull us this way and that. Tapping into our weaknesses and lulling us into worldly complacency. Luring us down the grimy paths of temptation. But we are not alone on this journey. If we look to God, we see that God is with us, guiding our paths. And Jesus Christ has gone before us, and with his help, we can learn to face any temptation and rise above it.