

Temptation
Matthew 4:1-11
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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The temptation of Christ is always preached on the first Sunday in Lent for several reasons. The first reason; watching Jesus resist temptation encourages us to resist our temptations with the understanding, try as we might, sooner or later we give in. This story also sets the stage for the beginning of Lent preparing us for Good Friday at the end of Lent. We stand at the foot of the cross remembering the times we didn't resist temptation and are compelled to face the terrible cost Christ paid for our sins.

Did you ever wonder what motivated Jesus to always resist temptation? The obvious answer is Jesus loved his father in heaven so much, he never wanted to let him down. But there's another equally important reason. Jesus never gave into temptation because he never wanted to let us down. He was totally obedient because he knew if he gave in to temptation just once, he'd disqualified himself from carrying out his prime directive: to die for the sins of the world.

Remember, only one completely innocent could satisfy God's need for perfect justice.

What do I mean by God's perfect justice? God's justice is unconditional. If God made allowances for our wrong doings, then justice would be compromised. Think of it this way, if the courts always allow criminals get away with murder, justice would be compromised. There'd be no consequences for committing crimes and that would be an injustice to the victims of crime.

In the same way, God's justice, would be compromised if no one ever had to pay the price. Thankfully, God's need for justice is equaled by God's desire for mercy. God through Christ mercifully took responsibility for our sins because God is love.

While the story of Jesus' temptations is really his story, the story of Adam's and Eve's temptation is really our story. What happened in the Garden of Eden is a cautionary tale that happens to all of us. We're always being tempted to make choices that deny God's authority over us. We tell God we don't need God, at least at that particular moment, because we want to do it our own way.

Remember the serpent's promise that finally undermined Adam and Eve's resistance to give in and eat the forbidden fruit? The serpent said if they ate the fruit they'd become like God. In other words, they'd become their own gods, not needing God anymore. Of course it was an outright lie. The serpent knew it, just as we know it. We can't take God's place. But that doesn't keep us from trying. When we do, like Humpty Dumpty we have a great fall. We become broken because we abdicate our innocence and deny God's will.

It's helpful to contrast Adams and Eve's fall with Jesus' resolve because if he didn't resist, the tight bond between God and himself would be broken.

Let's look at the story of Jesus' temptations. Immediately after his baptism and hearing the Father's affirmation, "You are my beloved son," the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. There he wrestled with the question, "What does it mean to be God's beloved son?"

Notice the laser like assault on Jesus' primary identity as God's beloved son. That's why before each temptation Jesus was taunted with, "If you are the son of God why not use your powers to provide security, power and self gratification not only for yourself but for the good people in the world you claim to love?"

You see what's happening here? Satan was trying to give to Jesus the same thing he gives us, an identity crisis. Jesus was tempted to question he was the beloved son, that God the Father wouldn't provide for him. Jesus was tempted to doubt the bond of he shared with his beloved father.

That's the same thing that happens to us. We get tempted to question our identity as a beloved child of God. When we question that identity the next step is to question whether God is really watching over us, caring for our needs and giving us our daily provision of blessings and grace. At its core that's what temptation is all about: waves of doubt leaving us with a spirit of rebellion. With our confidence shaken we turn from God and depend on ourselves. That's the first mistake that leads to confusion, isolation and despair.

The first temptation of Jesus was to turn stones into bread. It seems like a harmless temptation. Jesus was hungry after 40 days of fasting, why not turn stones into bread? But you see this temptation had more to do than just turning a few stones into a few morsels of bread to satisfy his hunger.

For Jesus and for us, this is where temptation becomes insidious, when we think we're tempted to do something harmless when in reality it has harmful ramifications.

For example, it would've been easy for Jesus to convince himself using his powers to help himself was not a terrible thing. But he was also being tempted to do something much broader than that: use his divine powers to take the easy way out.

Remember he just came from his baptism. He was baptized to be the suffering Messiah who willingly accepted his crucifixion. Now Jesus was tempted to have second thoughts. Instead of sacrificing and suffering for people, maybe it would be easier to give people what they need. Then, they don't have to sacrifice and suffer. So, give them what they want, satisfy their hunger.

The problem with that is we're never satisfied, the more we have the more we want. That explains why Jesus said to the tempter, "man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

Thank God Jesus resisted that first temptation. If Jesus gave in, we'd never know that real satisfaction comes from God and not ourselves. Jesus avoided the block Adam and Eve stumbled over by accepting what Adam and Eve denied, God alone is the source of complete satisfaction. If we go off looking for it someplace else, we'll get lost in our delusions and be miserable.

The next temptation doesn't seem as harmless as the first. It appears downright dangerous. Jesus was tempted to throw himself down from the top of the temple. He was also tempted to believe at the last minute God would send a squadron of angels to keep him from being splattered on the pavement.

What's that all about? Return to the scene immediately before Jesus retreated into the wilderness when Jesus was baptized to be Suffering Messiah. Once again he was having second thoughts. Now he was being tempted to be a triumphant Messiah, a charismatic ruler bringing glory to Jerusalem and prosperity to God's people. By throwing himself down from the pinnacle of the temple, it would be a grand entrance so much more spectacular than riding a donkey into Jerusalem while having palms waved in his face.

By pulling it off and surviving the 200 foot fall, with angels from heaven providing a soft landing, Jesus could proclaim the reestablishment of David's kingdom. He'd be an instant celebrity. People would be awed and afraid. Isn't that what earthly kings want from their people, being awed and afraid because God's power might destroy you?

Putting it bluntly, Jesus was tempted to abuse his power to make himself powerful. His kingdom would be of this world. He would not be coming to serve but to be served and hold the many ransom, instead of being a ransom for many. It would be so much easier for Jesus to be the king everybody wanted instead of the King nobody wanted. It would be a graceful way out of the crucifixion.

It's hard to believe Jesus would ever consider doing any of these things. The Jesus we know would never pull rank and abuse other people to glorify himself. And yet, this temptation story reveals Jesus came very close to doing just that.

You know what it's like trying to resist temptation. You use up a lot of energy, you become tense and edgy until you make the decision to either resist and walk away or give in and indulge yourself. Jesus was going through the same thing we do, but the stakes were much higher because if he gave in there's be no hope for us.

Thankfully for us, Jesus ended this bout of temptation by declaring, "You shall not put the Lord your god to the test."

No sooner getting out of that struggle another came at him fast and furiously. This time Jesus was not taunted with the opening line “If you are the son of God, instead Jesus was immediately confronted with the worldly power and wealth. It would all be his for the taking. He only had to switch teams and worship the Prince of this World instead of the Lord of Creation.

Again, it’s hard to imagine Jesus even considering this. But according to the Scriptures he did. He had to choose between the Kingdom of God and the way of the world which would be an easier and nicer path for him to take. The same path many have taken before and since.

Not buying it, again thankfully for our sakes, Jesus brushed aside this temptation by saying “Away from me Satan,” making it plain his relationship with his Father in heaven wasn’t for sale.

Apparently Jesus told his temptation story to his disciples so they could learn from the warning signs Jesus experienced when they were being tempted. Then they passed it on to us for the same reason, to give us wisdom and motivation to resist when our own temptations come. Like Jesus and the apostles, we are tempted to doubt God’s love and our identity as God’s beloved sons and daughters. We are also tempted to give into our hunger for security, our obsession for recognition, and our desire to control people and events.

When temptations come, remember Jesus and his motivation to resist. He didn’t want to do anything that would keep him from dying on the cross for you. He resisted temptation to be completely unblemished and innocent when the time came for him to be the sacrificial Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Jesus said, “If anyone would follow me then first deny yourself, pick up your cross and then follow me.”

Really, is there an alternative?