

## ***"Temptation"***

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March 10, 2019

Let's open our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, help us to resist temptation. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

Fishermen aren't the only ones to use fishing lures. One of the largest freshwater turtles is the alligator snapping turtle. They're found primarily in the southeastern United States. These massive turtles have been known to weigh 250 pounds. The alligator snapping turtle relies on a uniquely deceitful method of foraging for fish.

The turtle will lie completely still on the bottom of a lake or river with its mouth wide open. At the end of the turtle's tongue is a small, pink, worm-shaped appendage. The turtle wiggles the end of its tongue so that it looks like a worm moving through the water. When a fish comes to eat the worm, the turtle closes its jaws with tremendous speed and force, catching the fish. Temptation comes in the guise of something desirable.

A cartoon in the *New Yorker* magazine showed some pigs feeding at a trough. As the farmer filled the trough with food, one pig asked the others, "Have you ever wondered why he's so good to us?" Temptation seems friendly at first, but leads to destruction.

A couple of boys tried to walk through a corral when a bull saw them and began to charge. One of the boys said, "Let's stop and pray." The other boy said, "No, let's run and pray!" We need to flee from temptation and pray.

Martin Luther once said, "Don't sit near the fire if your head is made of butter." The closer we get to the fire, the hotter the fire feels to us. Even though the fire remains the same temperature, the heat affects us

according to how close we are to it. The closer we are to temptation, the more it affects us. Said another way, it's is hard to pick forbidden fruit if you're a hundred yards away.

There – I've just about covered temptation using anecdotes!

Our reading this morning from the gospel according to Luke is God's guide for us on temptation. Jesus has just been baptised by John the Baptist in the Jordan, where "the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove." Then the Holy Spirit leads Jesus off into the wilderness for forty days of fasting and temptation by the devil.

The culmination of Jesus' forty day ordeal, is the devil taunting Jesus with "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." But Jesus responds by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3 that "One does not live by bread alone." Then in an instant, the devil shows Jesus all of the kingdoms of the world and offers them to Jesus if he will worship the devil. But Jesus responds by quoting Deuteronomy 6:13 to "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him." The devil picks up on Jesus' use of scripture and quotes Psalm 91 that counsels trusting God, and tempts Jesus to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem. But Jesus responds with yet another quote, this time from Deuteronomy 6:16: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Jesus prevails over the temptations of the devil, but we're left with an uneasy feeling as the devil merely departs "until an opportune time."

Temptation is a human characteristic and it's Jesus' humanity that's being tempted by the devil. Temptation is when we're faced with something attractive that we have the ability to do, but we don't have the legal or moral authority to do it: the more attractive it is and the more able we are to do it; the stronger the temptation. Some temptations are pretty black and white, like the very real temptation of alcohol for an alcoholic or drugs

for an addict. But most often there's a moral dilemma; a decision with shades of grey rather than black and white. And there's often a deceptive truth to temptation. Jesus is tempted to turn a stone into bread to satisfy his personal hunger. We're tempted to selfishly satisfy our own needs rather than those of others. Jesus is tempted to seek authority over others in a deal with the devil. We're tempted to use our authority, or to acquiesce to the authority of others rather than follow our hearts. Jesus is tempted to test God's love for him. And we too, are tempted to test God's love for us.

Two observations about Jesus' temptation by the devil are helpful. First, there's an uncanny resemblance between Jesus' forty days of temptation in the wilderness and the forty years of testing of Moses and the Israelites, also in the wilderness. Israel is referred to as the *Son of God* and so is Jesus. Both are led by the Spirit after amazing revelations of God. Both involve testing with bread or manna, testing of authority, and testing of idolatry. All three of Jesus' quotes are from Deuteronomy which recounts the tests of the Israelites in the wilderness. And there are more similarities, but there is one very important difference: in each case, the Israelites succumb to temptation, and sin against God. Jesus resists temptation, even when confronted directly by the deceptions of the devil. Jesus is fully human, but he is not like the Israelites or even like Moses. Jesus is the Son of God.

Second, the temptations of Jesus are referred to briefly by Mark and also by Matthew, but Luke changes the order of the three temptations. Matthew places the temple scene second and the view of all the kingdoms of the world from a mountaintop third. As we heard today, Luke places the temple in Jerusalem third as the grand finale to foreshadow Jesus' ultimate triumph over the devil in Jerusalem. When Jesus returns to Jerusalem, Luke says that the devil enters into Judas to betray Jesus; the devil is

involved in Peter's denial of knowing Jesus; and the devil is involved with the high priests and soldiers who seize Jesus on the Mount of Olives. Then, when Jesus is more than just hungry; when Jesus has been tortured and is rejected to die on the cross; Jesus conclusively triumphs over the devil. When the devil departs until an opportune time, Luke is foreshadowing the amazing events in Jerusalem that all of his readers already know: Jesus' victory over sin and death on the cross and the risen Christ's assurance of God's profound love for us. Luke is pointing directly to Easter: to God's love for us, to the perfect divinity of Jesus, to the forgiveness of our imperfection and sin, and to victory over death!

William Barclay said that "temptation is not meant to make us fail; it is meant to confront us with a situation out of which we emerge stronger than we are." In a survey by Discipleship Journal, 84% of respondents said that resisting temptation was accomplished by prayer, 76% said avoiding compromising situations, and 66% said Bible study. God led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil and Jesus demonstrates how we too can resist temptation.

Homer, the legendary Greek author of the *Odyssey*, written seven or eight centuries before Christ, tells us that when Ulysses came to the Aeaean isle where Circe, the daughter of the sun god Helios lived, Ulysses climbed a hill and saw a palace in the center of the island. Ulysses sent half his crew under the command of Eurylochus to see if they would find hospitality. When the men approached the palace, it was surrounded by wild but magically benign animals and they heard singing from within. All the men entered except for their leader, Eurylochus, who suspected danger. Circe served the men wine and other delicacies. When they had eaten and drank heartily, she touched each of them with her wand, and they were immediately changed into pigs. When Eurylochus returned and

told Ulysses of this disaster, Ulysses immediately went to rescue his men. On the way, he was met by Mercury, who warned him of the dangerous power of Circe. But since Ulysses would not be dissuaded from attempting to rescue his men, Mercury put in his hand a flower, the fragrance of which would enable him to resist the power of Circe. Armed with this flower, Ulysses entered the palace and Circe entertained him as she had his crew; and when he had eaten and drank, she touched him with her wand. But, protected from her power by the flower which he carried, Ulysses drew his sword and compelled her to release his companions and restore them to their human form.

We have been given a flower to overcome the power of temptation, and that flower is the Bible. Jesus quoted from the Bible because the Word of God has the power we need to resist temptation.

During Lent, we're called to consider how much God loves us in the midst of our human temptations. In facing these temptations, rely on the Bible and know that in our resistance we become stronger, because we are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.