

LENT 1 C
February 14, 2016
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13
"Worldly Temptations"
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Temptation. It's something that's **very familiar to anyone who suffers from chemical dependency**. It's a battle they must fight almost every waking minute of every day. But temptation probably isn't something most of us think about a lot.

If we do think or talk about temptation, it's often in the most trivial of terms. We may be "tempted" to take a second piece of chocolate cake, or we might be "tempted" to call in sick to work. We may not take temptation seriously, but the Bible takes temptation very seriously.

In today's Gospel text, Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit in the wilderness, where he's tempted by the devil. This **encounter is real**, and it's **not about a second piece of chocolate cake**.

Rather, it's clearly a life-or-death struggle. And, ultimately, **it's our eternal life or death that hangs in the balance**.

If Jesus gives in to any of these temptations; if he chooses a path other than obedience to the will of his Father, then we are left without a savior – without salvation.

Jesus takes temptation very seriously. That's why he **includes a specific petition about it in the prayer he taught us: "And lead us not into temptation."** Jesus knows that we will face temptation. In fact, **sometimes our journey of returning to God takes us right through the wilderness of temptation**.

Satan's temptation of Jesus was **very real, and very subtle**.

You see, none of Satan's proposals are obviously bad. Temptation is rarely a simple matter of rejecting something that's bad in order to choose something that's good.

Temptation is usually far more subtle than that. **The Prince of Darkness often masquerades as an angel of light**.

And **behind each of Satan's proposals** to Jesus is the notion that **Jesus ought to take advantage of his status as Son of God and use that power for good**.

That doesn't seem so bad, does it?

Everything Satan offers him could be **beneficial to humanity**: bread to feed a hungry world, political power, (to do good, of course), and spectacular religious signs which could help people believe.

But **Jesus sees through the devil's clever tricks**, and he rejects all attempts to get him to **take control of his life away from God**. He lives always within the gracious will of his Father.

The tempter is a master at what he does. Note how in his temptation there's **a very clever attempt to sow doubt** in Jesus' mind about his relationship to God. *"If you are the Son of God..."* he says.

This technique worked on Adam and Eve, but it doesn't work on Jesus. Because Jesus is sure of his relationship to God. He believes God's words of promise, and, even though **other paths look much more inviting** than the way of the cross, Jesus trusts that God knows what's best, and so he's obedient, even unto death.

And of course, **that has made all the difference for you and for me**. But what about us? How do we experience the struggle with temptation?

The **bad news** is that **the Tempter is still diabolically clever**. Satan still knows all the tricks.

In sports like basketball, hockey, and football, the key to almost any good play is **the fake**. You get your opponent to look one way, and you go the other way to score.

The fake is a technique Satan has perfected. Because he knows **it's easy to get us to concentrate on the obvious temptations**, ones that **look powerful**: temptations to swear, lust, steal, or lie.

And while we are setting up our defense against these sins, Satan sneaks in with much more powerful, subtle temptations – temptations which challenge our relationship with God at its very core.

Martin Luther called the obvious sins, "*puppy sins*." It's not that they aren't important – of course they are – but they are weak compared to the **big ones**, which **always come silently or secretly and attack God's word for us**.

Satan uses the fake to make us focus on the "*puppy sins*" so that, while our backs are turned, he can attack us with his big plays.

Let me give a couple of examples of the powerful temptations I'm talking about.

The **most basic temptation of all** is the temptation to **break the first commandment** by putting something other than God at the center of my life.

Our **Lenten Theme** this year talks about all those other things that we're tempted to focus on as treasures. There are so many gifts – so many treasures – that our loving God has given us.

Many of these are good things. They certainly may not seem like evil temptations. But whenever these treasures take the place of God in our lives, then we are falling for the devil's temptation.

And we are missing out on the priceless treasure that God so desperately wants us to enjoy – the treasure of His love – the treasure of salvation through his Son, Jesus Christ.

The most subtle variation of this temptation is for me to put my family at the center of my life. In our society, where **so many of us adults feel guilty because we realize that we should do a better job of putting our children or our spouse before our own needs**, it's easy to take that a step further and make them the center of our lives.

But we are called instead to always put God at the center of our lives.

Yes, our children are **the most precious gift we have in this world**, but the giver of those gifts must always be at the center of our lives. **Satan is really good at making us forget that**. So, for example, we

might **decide to forgo church on a Sunday morning because we want to have some quality time together with our children.**

Another of the tempter's tricks is the temptation to **make us question our relationship with God** – the temptation to **doubt God's words of promise to us.** If we give in, then we end up doubting our own faith, or our own salvation.

Remember, **Satan is an expert at planting seeds of doubt.** And he can make the doubts seem very logical, or even positive.

He can ask questions like,

"How can a few drops of ordinary water, sprinkled on you when you were just a baby, really offer you assurance of forgiveness and eternal life? Doesn't it make sense that you should have to do something to make God accept you?"

Or **in the midst of trouble**, Satan might use the words of a well-meaning friend to make us doubt our faith: *"If only you had a strong faith, you would find a job,"* or, *"If you really believed and prayed harder, then you could beat this illness."*

Before you know it, we are doubting God's promises of salvation – doubting that God even cares about us, or doubting that we are *"worthy"* of God's love, (as if we could ever be worthy of grace.)

Friends, we all have to face these temptations. And sometimes we'll feel very much alone in the wilderness of temptation.

Sometimes we will struggle valiantly to know what is right – what is the way of obedience to God's will. And other times we will know very well what we should do, but we'll **find ourselves being pulled relentlessly in the opposite direction.**

And sometimes we'll fail. Sometimes we will fail miserably. The cross and the season of Lent remind us of that. Even though we are beloved children of God, we are still sinners.

So what should we do when we fail? We should look to Jesus. And far more important than seeing Jesus as a model, is seeing him as the victor: the one who defeated the devil and **all his works and all his empty promises.**

Jesus beat the devil in the wilderness.

But, more importantly, the cross tells us that **at Calvary, Jesus faced the worst Satan could throw at him, and Jesus was victorious.**

The cross tells us that **Jesus has done what we can never do**: he has perfectly obeyed the Father, and **by doing so, he has won forgiveness and everlasting life for all who believe in him**. He has opened up the way for sinners to return to the Lord. his victory on the cross is our return ticket.

So we have a strong ally in our daily struggles against temptation: Jesus Christ, who resisted all temptations on his way to the cross.

As the writer of Hebrews says, "*Because he himself was tested, ... he is able to help those who are being tested.*" What comfort these words can offer, **as long as we refuse to let Satan plant doubt in our minds!**

Believe these words, my friends.

Our God doesn't lie. **Jesus is with you.** He can help.

When we face temptation, we should remember that our Lord has already defeated the tempter and overthrown his power forever.

Whenever we're **tempted by the worldly treasures that can so easily dazzle us** and divert us from our relationship with Christ, Jesus is there to gently guide us back.

And this victorious and risen Lord Jesus intends to help us to dwell within the priceless treasure of resurrection life in Him. Amen.