



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

1st Sunday in Lent: March 1, 2020

Sermon Title: "Temptation"

Gospel Text: Matthew 4:1-11

Every year, on the first Sunday in Lent, our Gospel reading contains an account of the temptations of Jesus as recorded by either Mark, Luke, or – as in the case of this year – Matthew. We've become so familiar with this story that I'm not sure we give it much thought anymore. It has become a cliché – like watching an old black and white Western movie where the sheriff and the outlaw faceoff against each other on the dusty main street of a frontier town. The formula is so familiar and the outcome so predictable that it scarcely draws our interest. We know that the sheriff will eventually defeat the outlaw, justice and order will be restored, and everyone will live happily ever after.

In today's Gospel, the weapon of the outlaw isn't a pearl-handled Colt six shooter, but *sin*. The devil will dangle the temptations of bodily passions, power, privilege, and popularity before Jesus to try to convince Jesus to seek his own glory instead of God's will, because the devil knows that separating Jesus from his *mission* and from all of *us* is the surest way for the devil to capture and enslave all of creation.

Of course we know how the battle resolves – with Jesus victorious and surrounded by ministering angels as his adversary slinks away. Yes, we know *what* happened that day. But *why* did it happen? Why did the Spirit lead Jesus out into the wilderness to be tempted, and why did Jesus submit to it? The answer is surprisingly direct. As the Book of Hebrews states, "[W]e do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin."¹ You see, this experience gave Jesus empathetic insight into what we endure every day. It also confirmed that Jesus's mission was for the redemption and liberation of creation, not his personal gain. As a fourth century church father² wisely observed, "What has not been assumed has not been healed." Jesus's defeat of his temptations was an important part of his larger victory over sin itself.

Yes, Jesus defeated *his* tempter. It's not so easy for *us* though, is it? We are surrounded by temptations. I think that's another reason why Matthew, Mark, and Luke went to such lengths to include this story. Today's Gospel spotlights a daily battle we are waging. Every day the devil dangles the temptations of bodily passions, power, privilege, and popularity before us, because the devil knows that separating us from Jesus is the surest way for the devil to capture and enslave us.

Temptations are so deadly for us because they are so subtle in their allure. As one theologian has noted, a temptation is appealing because it usually "does not invite us directly to do evil... that would be far too blatant. It pretends to show us a better way, where we finally

abandon our illusions and throw ourselves into the work of actually making the world a better place.” That’s why temptation is so destructive. At its heart, it makes God secondary “in comparison with all the apparently far more urgent matters that fill our lives” and taunts us to construct a world built on *our* foundations, not God’s, so that we set God completely aside.³ Temptations do this by appealing to our bodily passions and desires for power, privilege, and popularity, and twisting our egos and warping our moral code until we’re able to justify anything under the sun so long as it satisfies our appetites.

Jesus knew how we would struggle against temptation, and so when the disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, he included a specific petition to address this chronic human problem. We say it each time we worship – it’s the sixth petition of the Lord’s Prayer. Sometimes we pray it in a traditional manner: “Lead us not into temptation.” Other times we pray a more modernized version: “Save us from the time of trial.” Theologians keep wrestling with this petition. One recent translator proposed this earthy and urgent version: “And don’t, we beg you, take us into the ordeal.”⁴

So let’s take a deeper look at what’s going on when we are praying this petition. At the outset, let’s deal with the really big issue of the *source* of temptation. When we pray “lead us not into temptation,” it almost sounds like we’re asking *God* to not tempt us. So what do you think? Does God tempt us? Scripture provides a surprisingly straightforward answer. No. The Epistle of James says quite clearly that “God... tempts no one.”⁵ OK, that’s simple. God does not directly tempt us. But God can do anything. So why doesn’t God just prevent evil from tempting us? Can’t God do that? Of course God can do that. And yet God *does* sometimes allow temptations to enter into our lives.

But when God permits that to happen, it’s not to *tempt* us. It’s to *test* us. Those two things may sound alike, but they’re actually quite different because the *intent* is so different. When someone tempts you, they’re trying to separate you from God – to humiliate, hurt, diminish, and destroy you. But a *test* has a very different intent. A test measures progress and accomplishment and reveals those places where we need further growth. Think back to the very best teachers you had in school. They wanted you to excel in every test because, unlike a temptation, a test is intended to reinforce, affirm, support, and teach.

Our spiritual tests in this life have the capacity to draw us closer to God. They reveal how God has endowed us with gifts and called us to be a blessing in the world. And they are part of the way God forms and transforms us for discipleship, just as an athlete stresses and strains her muscles in order to achieve peak performance.

But temptations are aimed at wrecking our relationship with God and twisting and distorting our identity as God’s children so that we cling not to *Christ* but to *ourselves*, and in doing so remake ourselves into false gods who feel entitled to misuse people and things in ways that are damaging and self-destructive. And so we pray, “Lead us not into temptation.”

In his Small Catechism, Martin Luther explains this petition so wisely and so compactly. He writes, “It is true that God tempts no one, but we ask in this prayer that God would preserve and keep us, so that the devil, the world, and our flesh may not deceive us or mislead us into

false belief, despair, and other great and shameful sins, and that, although we may be attacked by them, we may finally prevail and gain the victory.”⁶ And so, my friends, we pray, “Lead us not into temptation.”

The older I get, the more I see the Church’s wisdom in bringing the story of Jesus’s temptation to us every year on the first Sunday in Lent. It’s a much-needed reminder of the breadth and depth of Jesus’s love because it illustrates that Jesus would undergo anything in order to love and bless us. But this story also reminds us that though Christ has won the victory over sin, death, and the devil for us, and the outcome is assured, the battle still rages on. Here in *our* wilderness, we face temptations every day. The nature of our temptations may change as we age and our circumstances change, but whether we are 5, 15, 45, or 85, temptations are part of our daily reality. That’s why we daily pray, “Lead us not into temptation.”

The season of Lent presents us the opportunity to release our grip on the passing fads and temporary pleasures that form the basis of so many of our temptations and, instead, to cling to Jesus Christ, our rock. His love for us is *perfect*, even though *we* are *not*. And so as we await his ministering angels, we his flawed but beloved people confidently pray, “Lead us not into temptation.” Amen.

Citation:

¹ Hebrews 4:15.

² Gregory of Nazianzus

³ *Jesus of Nazareth* by Joseph Ratzinger (2007, p. 28)

⁴ *The Face of Water: A Translator on Beauty and Meaning in the Bible* by Sarah Ruden (2017, p. 123.)

⁵ James 1:12

⁶ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 1164.