

“Unfinished Temptations.”

Matthew 4:1-11
First Sunday in Lent

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As a child, I was somewhat aware that Lent was a time of sacrifice. I don't think I would have used that word, but from very early on, the idea of giving something up for Lent was pretty familiar to me. I was well aware that my Roman Catholic neighbors didn't eat meat on Fridays during Lent, even well after Vatican II has lifted such prohibitions. Both my Sunday School friends and my friends at Colgate Elementary would frequently compare notes about what we were going to give up for Lent this year. Chocolate was always a biggie. Soda was right up there, too. Cookies, perhaps more of a sacrifice on our heads, since Lent almost always coincided with Girl Scout cookie season. The common denominator seemed to be dessert, I suppose, or maybe just sugar. In our youthful idealism, we would willingly—even enthusiastically—sacrifice those sweet things in life, the things that might truly tempt a child of 8 or 10 years old.

In my family, too, we talked about giving things up for lent, and put that talk into action—admittedly small, symbolic action. We had a bank shaped like a loaf of bread on the table, for an "extra" offering for World Hunger. For a while, we even had a very simple dinner once a week—just oatmeal, maybe, or plain white rice with a little butter and salt. Mom would figure out how much money we were saving by having that meal instead of, say pot roast or a baked chicken dinner, and then we'd put the money we saved into the Hunger bank, too. We called it our “sacrificial meal,” and it was part of our Lenten practice for at least a decade or more. Later on, in different communities in which I was involved, we had similar meals, sometimes call solidarity meals, in which the point was also to feel a sense of solidarity or camaraderie with those who regularly do not have enough to eat—maybe not a fast, strictly speaking, but something very much like one.

Around my family dinner table, especially during these “sacrificial meals” we had during Lent, we would often make the connection between the season of Lent, the practices of Lent and this passage from our Gospel today, or else the other ones like in Mark and Luke. Now, I realize this was not exactly normal—you have to remember, as *SOMEBODY* pointed out in the Youth Musical last week, I'm from a family of certifiable Church Nerds. The only one in my immediate family of origin who was not a Pastor's Kid was my dad, who was a pastor. But yes, we talked about these things. We talked about why the season of Lent is 40 days long, just like Jesus time of being tempted by the devil in the wilderness. We talked about how our giving something up for lent—even if it was a little, almost insignificant thing—was a way to remember how much Jesus gave up for us in his suffering and death. We talked about the things that the devil used to tempt Jesus during his time in the wilderness, and about the things that might tempt us in this day and age.

When we think about temptations, about those things that might tempt us in this day and age, it seems to me that too often we tend to go to one or another extreme. One extreme is the banal, the trivial, the insignificant. We are tempted by chocolate, by cookies, by soda. Those things my 8-year-old friends and I gave up way back when. That's not to say that there aren't those among us who truly struggle with either allergies or addictions to sugar or other foods, but **if** the only things we can come up with as

temptations are desserts, we might want to take a look at how sheltered or privileged our life might just be.

On the other hand—at the other extreme—are the big, sensational temptations, the ones that provide the story lines for soap operas and reality TV, that keep the tabloid papers in circulation. Sex, drugs, and a rock-and-roll lifestyle, we might say. Mostly sex, actually. True to its puritan roots, our culture, our society today tends almost automatically to equate the worst temptations, as well as the most egregious sins, with those of the sexual nature. Take the example of the movie from almost 30 years ago, based on the novel from over 60 years ago, “The Last Temptation of Christ.” There was a huge outcry over the film in particular, as it was assumed, particularly from many who had not seen the movie, that this last temptation must have been of a sexual nature. And while that may have been played up a bit more in the film, the point of the book, actually, was to argue that Jesus, while free from sin, was still subject to fear, doubt, depression, reluctance, and lust. The author contends that by facing and conquering all human weaknesses, Jesus struggled to do God's will *without* ever giving in to the temptations of the flesh, stressing that the last temptation was actually the opportunity to save himself from death on the cross.

But let's go back and take a look at these **first** temptations of Christ, those outlined in our gospel reading today. No sooner has Jesus emerged from the waters of his baptism, he is driven into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, a season of fasting and testing lasted more than a month.

The devil tempts him with these three demands: turn these stones into bread (since you're obviously hungry); throw yourself off the top of the temple (to see if God will truly protect and rescue you); and bow down and worship me (and I will give you power over all these worldly kingdoms). In nearly each instance, the devil makes his demands based on scripture, which, among other things should remind us of how easy it is to make the bible say what we want it to say, if we overlook the context of each particular passage and ignore the sweep of its overall message.

The first temptation offered by the devil is the temptation to perform the miraculous. The devil entices Jesus to use his special powers to set aside the laws of nature and prove he is truly God with a miracle—magic, you might even call it. You're hungry? Make these stones into bread. You're thirsty—why not water from the rock, after all, if Moses can do it so can you! But Jesus refuses. And it's not like Jesus *can't* do such things, we know from reading ahead that Jesus did use his God given powers to reconcile, to heal, to provide for the physical needs of the people around him, often using such miraculous powers. Water into wine. Feeding 5,000 with five loaves and two fish. Even raising Lazarus from the dead.

The difference here, it seems to me, is both that Jesus is unwilling to use these gifts, these powers simply to prove something (as if parading around his miracles would win over the devil himself) but even more than that, Jesus is not willing to use the power of miracles simply to provide for his own human needs. Perhaps this is when Jesus temptation becomes our own: when we are tempted to use our own God-given talents or gifts, or else the place we have in society, our place, our privilege not to serve the neighbor, but simply to serve ourselves. Similarly, we do not live by bread alone; nor can we even truly live alone, no matter how much bread we have.

The second temptation is the temptation to the spectacle. The devil asks Jesus to throw himself down from the top of the temple so the God's angels would snatch him up, presumably at the very last minute—a prime time special event if ever there was one. Here Jesus rejects such celebrity, such an attempt to turn his faith, his deep relationship with God into simply a show. See, if the devil had been here this past Ash Wednesday, he would have heard Pastor John say these words from the heart of our first Lenten gospel: “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them.” We are instructed not to make a spectacle of our faith, not to make a show of our faith practices. Not hide them, or deny them in a public setting, but certainly not to make a big deal out of them. This is consistent with the words of the prophets, especially Amos, who calls out to those who would turn their religious practice into a performance piece: I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ... Instead, let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

This temptation becomes our temptation when we decide to turn our religious practice, the living out of our faith into a performance. When we act like a passive audience attending a show, or when we reduce the practice of our faith to a few set pieces of performance—consuming it like we might a television show, rating it according to our likes and dislikes as we might a movie, especially during awards seasons, celebrating the celebrity of Jesus, rather than following his teachings, holding up the social and cultural normativity of Christianity, rather than the sacrifice and discipleship it demands of us.

And of course, the third temptation, is the temptation to get and hoard worldly power. Here, there is no nuance or subtlety, no gray area of symbolic reading in what the devil is offering Jesus. He shows him, we are told, all of the kingdoms of this world, all dominions, empires, nations, peoples, and says to him, quite simply, all this will be yours if you bow down and worship me. And while his answer is the most straight forward and seems to remind the devil that the power of these kingdoms is not actually the devil's to give, this is perhaps the temptation we followers of Christ have struggled with the most over the years.

From Faust to “Damn Yankees” to “House of Cards,” there is a whole sub-genre of literature in our culture about the various ways we humans make deals with the devil to secure our power. Even in less obvious ways, there is a human tendency to seek out earthly power and hold onto it tightly. Jesus calls us to put our trust in him, not in ourselves. To worship God alone, not the political or social power that tempts and entices us and that can corrupt and lead astray even the best among us. Worship God alone, he tells the devil. Serve only God.

Jesus give us the words to say as similar times of temptation. We, too are to love, serve, and worship God, not ourselves, not our power, not our position, not our privilege.

Unlike Jesus' temptations, which lasted forty days, our temptations are unfinished. We contend with the devil and all his empty promises in one way or another pretty much all the time. Maybe not in such vivid and memorable ways as Jesus did, but if the season of Lent reminds us anything, it reminds us that our struggle with temptation is unfinished. And these unfinished temptations continue their attempt to get us off our game, to knock us out of balance, to lead us away from following Jesus.

But remember, my friends, remember, that the one who calls us to walk this unfinished Lenten journey is also the one who walks along side us. Jesus accompanies us on this walk that he has already walked. This Jesus feeds thousands with a few loaves of bread, and continues to set a table for us. This Jesus trusts God to protect him all the way to the cross, and offers us that protection in the shadow of his cross. This Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords, more powerful in his way than any of the rulers of this earth. Our temptations may be unfinished, but we walk with the one who overcame them all. Thanks be to God. AMEN.