

Temptation? I know a shortcut...

We are back in Luke's Gospel chronological order, after last week's deviation for Transfiguration. Just before today's reading, Jesus was baptised and we have learned that nothing ever happens in a simple way with Jesus. He's baptised in the river Jordan, and as he was raised up from the water, Luke tells us the spirit of God alighted on him in the form of a dove. Then God said "This is my Son, my Beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

No party for Jesus. No opportunity for congratulatory snacks, it was straight into the desert for him. The Holy Spirit after landing on Jesus, then led him to the desert where he was tempted by the devil for forty days and forty nights. Could you imagine? We are told he ate nothing at all for those forty days.

The average person can survive only three days without water. If not eating or drinking, the average person lasts up to ten days. If not eating yet still consuming water, the average person can live a few months, providing water is still consumed. The source I consulted recommended 1.5 liters of water a day fortified with a bit of salt to help regulate the body.

We aren't given a lot of information about the devil in scripture. Some scholarship points to the devil being the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Some scholarship points to the devil as a fallen angel who also takes on several names: Beelzebub, Beelzebul, Satan, Lucifer, etc. The devil also makes an appearance in most world religions, in one form or other, which implies nothing is ever completely good, nor is anything ever completely evil.

Which leads us to the title of this sermon. I saw the best bumper sticker many years ago which read "Lead us not into temptation? Follow me, I know a shortcut!"

For most of us, temptation is seen as something sinful..or at least, something naughty. And yet, advertisers specialise in temptation. We are led to believe there is something lacking in us. We are not tall enough, blonde enough, young enough, thin enough to be acceptable to "society" and thus ...

If we buy this product, listen to this podcast, buy this book, adopt this lifestyle, we will be younger, blonder, smarter, more acceptable, and thus our lives will be better. And after all, don't we deserve it?

The devil tempts Jesus in several ways...

He appeals to his relationship with God – “If you are the son of God...”

He appeals to his desire for power – “...all this can be yours...”

And yet, Jesus doesn't bend to any of it.

Attempt Number One –

Jesus is said to be famished after fasting for 40 days. The devil points to a rock and says...“If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.’

Jesus answers him, ‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone.” ’

Strike Number One!

Attempt Number Two –

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, ‘To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’

Jesus answers him, ‘It is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.” ’

Strike Number Two!

Attempt Number Three –

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you”, and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”

Jesus answered him, ‘It is said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Strike Number Three! The devil is outta there! See ya later!

Now, I'm curious. Was Jesus tempted every day by the devil? We are told that he was tempted every day and yet only three specifics are given, which were at the conclusion of the forty days. I'm thinking these temptations may have been small irritants, not huge life-changing moments, such as the three previously discussed.

Was it a bowl of almonds left out, for snacking?

Was it a glass of Jesus' favourite wine or beer?

Was it a new robe of the finest linen that was just Jesus' size?

We aren't told, but in reality, it musn't matter much or it would have been recorded somewhere.

What kind of things tempt you?

Is it power?

Is it wealth?

Is it reputation?

Temptation is defined as: the act of tempting or the state of being tempted especially to evil : enticement. 2 : something tempting : a cause or occasion of enticement. (www.merriam-webster.com)

To me, temptation is something that can potentially lead us astray, and it can also lead us to something greater than ourselves. When I was testing a call to the priesthood, I had experienced a deep yearning from within, but wasn't sure what was missing. It was only with self-examination, conversation, prayer, meditation and a disembodied voice calling to me, that I decided to give in to the temptation of a different life from the life I then had.

Temptation can be seemingly harmless. You're at a gathering and you are offered a glass of wine. You don't generally drink and so you politely decline but then you hear "oh, come on, just one drink, it won't hurt you..." and you give in. Maybe you have only one glass of wine, or maybe you finish the bottle.

You have been watching what you eat and have cut all processed foods out of your diet. At the same gathering someone offers you a slice of cake and you politely decline, but then you hear "oh come on, one slice of cake, it won't hurt you..." and you give in. Maybe you have only one slice of cake, or maybe you

finish the entire cake.

The next day you wake up with a revolting hangover and an upset stomach. Your body is not happy with you, because you gave in to temptation. Is it really such a big deal?

What if this scenario is about people, instead of food and drink?

Let's say you are at a gathering and you see someone you find attractive. You go over to them and chat with them, maybe flirt a little and ask to walk them home. They seem a bit uncomfortable but agree, possibly because they don't want to appear rude. So you take their hand and walk them home. At the door they turn to leave and you turn them towards you, pulling them in for a kiss. What's the big deal, it's just one kiss.

Except they are married. And so are you.

The thing to remember is that temptation is NOT the sin. Giving into the temptation IS the sin.

Mike and Karen Pence were said to follow the Billy Graham Rule, which was developed in 1948. Simply stated, Mike would not dine with a woman or be present where alcohol is served, without Karen by his side. The belief was that neither of them was whole without the other.

Now the Billy Graham Rule and all its repercussions is fodder for a sermon all on it's own. I bring it here to describe another way to view temptation.

What it comes down to is how you live your life. There is a saying "if you cannot do it in the light, you should not do it in the dark". Make of this what you will. When I have spoken with individuals who are terrified of temptation and sin I ask them how they live their lives. Do they live them in a state of sheer terror, or do they live their lives to the best of their ability.

If we live in a perpetual state of fear our neurological system goes awry. It remains in a constant state of flight, whether the danger is real or not.

For many of us, our neurological system is already stressed to breaking because of the perpetuity of this global pandemic. Add to that the war happening in Ukraine, the shocking rise in gas price and the overall state of chaos in the world, and temptation becomes overwhelming.

I believe, at our core, we are decent human beings who know the difference between right and wrong. We can separate temptation as an individual choice i.e. the glass of wine or piece of cake, and as life-altering i.e. kissing a person who is not your spouse.

Yes, they are all temptations. Yet I refuse to live my life in a constant state of deprivation and misery. This is part of the reason why I encouraged those who gathered on Ash Wednesday to set down a bad habit, rather than depriving oneself of something enjoyable, such as a piece of cake or a glass of wine. In my case, a cup of tea.

Friday night I participated in an Affirm panel discussion on 2SLGBTQIA+ for International Pie day, happening on the 14th of March called "Everyone Gets a Slice". We were a diverse panel made up of men and women, along every spectrum of the "alphabet mafia". Half of us were clergy, half were black, half were plus size and all of us were unapologetically authentic.

In one way or another all of us on that panel have all been "othered" because of our appearance, education or lack thereof, amount of melanin in our skin, or lack thereof, our gender, our sexual identity. We have all sought to be apologetic because we aren't the societal "normal" of straight, white and male. Inclusion means just that...including everyone. No-one should be made to feel less than or be "othered" because they don't fit into a specific box with a specific label. No one.

I live my life as though God is watching everything I do. Because I believe God is. I won't put God in a box that gets tucked away when friends come over. God is front and centre of everything I do, and while God may not be visible to the naked eye, God is front and centre, in my heart and soul.

I refuse to live my life in a state of fear. I refuse to apologise for the space my body takes up. I encourage you to stand fast and tall. To live your life in full view of the Divine. To know the difference between right and wrong.

To live in the light and fullness of Christ. To listen and live in the lessons of God. To thrive and flourish in the comfort of the holy spirit.

Sometimes we need to give into temptation and have that extra cup of tea, or piece of chocolate. To buy something that is absolutely unnecessary but positively beautiful.

Yes, we are in the penitential season of Lent.

Yes, we should turn our focus inward and spend more time living in the silence. Life is short and we should live it fully, openly and unabashedly.

Don't let temptation scare you. Don't let fear of temptation rule your life. Follow the commandments, or at the very least the golden rule "treat others, the way you wish to be treated". Respect the "no". Don't bully. Be You. The authentic you. Nobody else can be you, except you. And You are a beloved child of God.

Always have been, and always will be.

Let all God's children say, AMEN!

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