

Sermon for Lent 1B  
Sunday, February 18, 2024  
“Temptations”

Texts: Mark 1:9-15; Genesis 9:8-17

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Good morning. It’s so great to be back after being away from you for seven weeks. During my break, I was in town on two or three Sundays, some of you even saw me. I was tempted, once or twice, to sneak in during the mass and sit quietly in the back and check up on you...but I didn’t.

OK, so I’m going to begin today by asking you a question. Now tell the truth: Is there anyone here who has *never* been tempted at least once in your life? Raise your hand. If you’re raising your hand, you need to think harder. There isn’t a single one of us here present who has *never* been tempted by something. Temptation is a regular part of the human condition. We are tempted all the time. The temptation might be small and insignificant, like being tempted to eat something we shouldn’t, or tempted to do something when we know we should be doing something else...sleeping in on a Sunday morning, going to a romantic dinner on Valentine’s Day instead of going to mass for Ash Wednesday. Or the temptation could be really big, involving a personal relationship, or doing something that is not in your best interest. We all face temptations that tear at our conscience and our souls. Often we succumb to those temptations and in doing so, we fall into sin, we do those things which we ought not to have done. It is in these intense moments that must not lose sight of our utter and complete dependence upon God to help us fight the temptation, confront our sin, and restore us to wholeness, wellness, and reconciliation.

In today’s Gospel lesson, we encounter the story of Jesus when he was tempted in the wilderness. The story is the account according to St. Mark. Now this version is very brief; it doesn’t go into the details of Jesus being tempted to turn stones into bread or make the world kneel at his feet. All it says is that “the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.” But, did you ever wonder why Jesus went into the wilderness in the first place? Well, the clue is in the first part of today’s Gospel story when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan, and “as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Jesus came face-to-face with who he was as the Word made flesh. The world came face-to-face with God himself being amongst humans and received news that God is with us. But, have you ever felt compelled or inspired to do something that made you feel uneasy, unsure if you had what it takes to do it or if you should do it at all? Have you been faced with a life-changing experience when you knew that your life would never be the same again? You just want to run away and hide. You feel like you

don't want to have to deal with the gravity of the situation. I imagine that Jesus felt like that when he heard the voice from heaven reminding him that he is God's Son, his beloved. In his divinity, he knew what lay ahead of him, from the hard ministry that he was about to begin to his suffering and death on the hard wood of the Cross. In his humanity, he was scared, and so, he ran away.

He ran away into the desert and was tempted by Satan. Now, Satan was probably not the mischievous figure that we often see depicted in paintings and such. It is more likely that Jesus was facing an inner struggle. That's how the devil gets to us. He is at the heart of our inner struggles, when we know we shouldn't, but we do it anyway. Those times when we try to justify our desire to sin or defend our bad behavior. Those times when we give into our own selfishness. The pairing of the story of Jesus's baptism experience and his temptation in the wilderness is significant. Jesus knew who he was, he knew what his life was going to be like going forward, he knew how he was going to die, and he knew that he had the power to avoid all of it. With no struggle at all, he could have used his divine power to force the world listen to him and follow him. With little effort, he could have changed the balance of power in his world by silencing those pesky Pharisees and making the Romans retreat and leave Judea. He could have said to himself, "I'm divine. I don't need to die on a cross." He could have taken matters into his own hands and given in to the devil on his back, but he didn't. That would have been selfish. "He was tempted in every way as we are, yet did not sin." Those are the words from the Preface of Lent, which we will hear at the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer during this season.

Lent is the season of our liturgical year when we come face to face with our shortcomings, our sinfulness, our lack of willpower to do the right thing. Lent is the time when come to terms with the temptations we constantly face, when we could take matters into our own hands and give in to the pressures of the world. Lent calls us to step back and recognize our utter dependence upon God to get us through all the pressures of our lives. That's one of the reasons why we fast and abstain in Lent. We try to remove things in our daily lives that distract us away from focusing on God. We give up the things we love to do, or eat, or spend money on in order to remind ourselves that we don't really need those things. Most importantly, fasting and abstinence helps us redirect our focus from ourselves, toward God. It guides us away from pride, hubris, and selfishness. Think about these words written by the 20<sup>th</sup> Century theologian, Thomas Merton:

"If you were really humble you would not bother about yourself at all. Why should you? You would only be concerned about God and with his will and with the objective order of things and values as they are, and not as your selfishness wants them to be. Consequently, you would have no more illusions to defend. Your movement would be free. You would not need to be hampered with

excuses which are only really framed to defend you against accusations of pride – as if your humility depended on what other people thought of you!”

All we really need is God: his love, his mercy, and his faithfulness. But it isn't easy. We're human. We aren't always strong enough not to give into temptation and the devil on our back. Lent reminds us that God is a forgiving God. When we come before him with a sincere and contrite heart, he will take our sin from us, he will relieve us of the weight of our shortcomings. He will not destroy us. He did that once before; he destroyed the world by a flood, but as the story from Genesis goes, after it was over, God said: Never again! “Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

The Church provides us with ways to confront our sinfulness, acknowledge our faults, and allow God's infinite goodness and mercy to free us from our bonds. One way happens during every mass when we say the general confession, but the other way is by making a sacramental confession. Yes, Episcopalians/Anglicans do confession! I encourage you to look in the *Book of Common Prayer* on page 447. There, you will find the rite for Reconciliation of the Penitent. Read it, think about it, pray about it, and then book an appointment with me to do it. Let go of the shortcomings in your life, the hurt, the barriers holding you or your spirit back, and make space for God to fill the void with his love, patience, acceptance, and mercy. Lent is the perfect time to begin making confession a part of your regular prayer life.

So, if you're facing a temptation or struggle right now, be thankful that it's Lent. If you're consumed with giving in to your selfish desires, wants, needs, and agendas, be thankful that it's Lent. Be thankful that we have built into our liturgical cycle a time when we can clean up our souls, clean up our lives, get a new chance to get right with God and be our best selves. God wants us to be our best selves and live our best lives. And he wants us to know that we don't need to try to live this life feeling alone, because God has our back and will always kick the devil off when we let him. Amen.

#### Resource

“Perfect Confidence in the Power of God” from *The Living Church Online*, [https://livingchurch.org/2021/01/01/perfect-confidence-in-the-power-of-god/?utm\\_source=The+Living+Church+Email+Updates&utm\\_campaign=f387257bd0-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2024\\_02\\_12\\_04\\_36&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_-f387257bd0-%5BLIST\\_EMAIL\\_ID%5D&mc\\_cid=f387257bd0&mc\\_eid=67c51f1e2e](https://livingchurch.org/2021/01/01/perfect-confidence-in-the-power-of-god/?utm_source=The+Living+Church+Email+Updates&utm_campaign=f387257bd0-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2024_02_12_04_36&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-f387257bd0-%5BLIST_EMAIL_ID%5D&mc_cid=f387257bd0&mc_eid=67c51f1e2e)