



Sermon of February 21, 1999



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"THE BIG TEMTATION"

MATTHEW 4:1-11

Lent is a journey of six weeks, from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday and Easter. It is a pilgrimage for those who want to renew their lives. I have been on tours where the tour leader, at the beginning of the journey, gives an outline of what you can expect to see and how to prepare for it. That is what I want to do as we begin the Lenten journey this morning.

The story of Jesus' temptations is to be read on this Sunday, because it provides for us the pattern for Lent. Jesus went to the desert for forty days and forty nights, to be tempted by the devil. The forty days and nights Jesus spent in the wilderness is the pattern for Lent. Lent lasts for forty days and nights, with the exception of Sundays.

That is a fact worth noting. It is instructive to know why Sundays are excepted from the season of Lent. Lent is a time of fasting, penitence and self-examination. Sunday is always a festival

day. Sunday is the day when we celebrate Christ's Resurrection. He was resurrected on Sunday, so every Sunday is a little Easter. The interruption of fasting and introspection is a way of reminding us what is essential in our faith. The center of our faith is God's victory in Jesus Christ in the Resurrection.

One of the temptations of Lent is to take ourselves and our sins too seriously. Like the man who was flying his airplane. All of a sudden the airplane went into a tailspin. He dropped several thousand feet before he could pull it out. Later somebody asked him, "What did you think about when you were falling?" He said, "All my sins flashed before my eyes. I found it so interesting, I went back up and did it again."

For those who enjoy wallowing in their sins, Lent is seen as a wonderful opportunity to experience it all over again. They feel miserable, so Lent makes it all worthwhile for them.

But come Sunday, we are to put our introspection into perspective. All Christian introspection should be done in light of the Resurrection. Which is to say, that what we have done, is confessed in light of what God has already done for us. That is why we sometimes read, as a Call to Confession, these wonderful words: "Let us confess our sins as those who know they are already forgiven." That is the good news. The good news is that because of the Resurrection we can put our past behind us, and we can get on with living the life that God has given to us.

That is what Sundays are for. Sundays are reminders of the victory that has been given to us by our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore they are excluded from the season of Lent to remind us that we confess our sins as those who know they are already forgiven.

The story of The Temptations comes in the 4th chapter of Matthew, just after his baptism and at the beginning of his ministry. His baptism served as a call for Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of God. God, at the baptism, said to Jesus, "You are my Son, with whom I am well pleased." So immediately he is tested by the devil to see if he has what it takes to be the Son of God, to be the Messiah. Which means, the temptations for Jesus serve as kind of a boot camp.

Incidentally, Lent was originally established for new Christians, those who experienced a call. They were to spend forty days and forty nights preparing for their baptism. If at the end they still wanted to follow Jesus, then on Easter Eve they would be baptized as the sun was rising in the east, signaling the new day, the new era, that has been inaugurated because of the Resurrection.

I am sure it had a powerful significance for them, to have prepared for their vocation as Christians the same way that Jesus prepared for his vocation as the Messiah: forty days of introspection and self-examination.

But later the Church used the forty days as a time of renewal for those who were already Christians, because at a certain point everyone in the empire became a Christian, everyone was baptized as infants. So the time of Lent was used as a time of renewal and recommitment to the Christian life, examining our lives in light of the one we are supposed to follow.

That is what we will be doing on this journey. We will look at events in the life of Jesus and examine our life in light of them. We begin this morning with the story of his temptations.

I have to admit to you that I have trouble with this. The problem is very easily explained. I am not a Messiah, though sometime I suspect I try to be. But in my more sensible moments I know that I am not Jesus Christ, and his temptations are not my temptations. I have never been tempted to turn stones into bread. I don't want to be king over all the nations of the earth. And I certainly don't want to jump off any tower. Those are messianic temptations. So I have always had trouble identifying with Jesus' temptations.

But I think I have finally figured it out. It is not Jesus' temptations we are supposed to identify with. We are to learn from the way he countered the temptations.

There are three temptations, and there are three responses. All three responses have to do with remembering that it is God who is in charge. In fact, all three responses are some form or variation of the first commandment, that there is no other God before me, worship no other God. Listen to Jesus' three responses again.

One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

Do not put the Lord your God to a test.

Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.

Now Jesus' temptations--and mine, and, I suspect, yours,--is to forget that. To forget that God is in charge. To forget the first commandment. Luther said, "Let God be God." That is the way we are supposed to live. Which means trusting that God's plan for the world and for your life is more powerful than anything that threatens to cancel it. Our temptation is to put our trust in our plans and believe that we are in charge of our lives. Therefore if our plans are cancelled, then we think our life has come to an end.

Just like Peter. That is the source of the scene at Caesarea Philippi. The teaching ministry of Jesus is over. The Passion is about to begin. Jesus announces to the disciples that he is about to go to Jerusalem, to suffer and to die. That interrupts Peter's plans. Peter planned on a glorious career in Galilee. So Peter turns to Jesus, and says, "God forbid that this should ever happen!" Jesus turns to Peter, and says, "Get behind me Satan!" Which is exactly what he said to the devil in his temptations. The temptation is to forget that God's plan for this world, and God's plan for my life, is more powerful than anything that threatens to cancel his plan.

Jesus is going to test that now. That is what we will look at in Holy Week. He will go to the very heart of the enemy's camp, knowing exactly what is going to happen to him. But he is trusting that God's plan is stronger than anything that they can do to him.

The temptation is think that you are in charge, not God. I think that is why he taught us in the Lord's Prayer to pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." In fact, one translation of that petition reads, "Lead us not into temptation, deliver us from the evil one," tying the petition in the Lord's Prayer to the temptation story. Which means that Jesus expected you and me to go through the same thing he did. That is why the petition says, "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." That is not the end of the Lord's Prayer, it's the

conclusion of the petition. "Lead us not into temptation, deliver us from the evil one, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever."

I finally got it, after all these years. These three words in the Lord's prayer refer to the three things that the devil offered Jesus: the kingdoms of this world, the power to do whatever you want in this world, and the glory that belongs to divinity. And all three he rejected, because those three things belong to God alone.

We pray the petition to remember that God is in charge, and to have the courage to let God be God. "For thine is the kingdom and the power [a power greater than any power that threatens to cancel our plans] and the glory forever."

So while I used to think this story had nothing to say to me, since I am no Messiah, I think it speaks now to the most insidious temptation that I have, the one I call, "The Big Temptation." That is, the temptation to be in charge. That's what the devil was offering Jesus. If I could only be in charge. If I could only control things, like my future, or my present for that matter.

I have to be honest, and say, my future is increasingly a matter of concern to me. I mean, I've made plans. I've stored up provisions. I've tried to take charge of my life. You know that phrase, "Take charge of your life." The wise men of this age tell us to do that, and I have tried to do it. But I've been around long enough, and I have buried enough people, to know that if you think you are in charge of your future, you're a fool. You are being tempted. And the temptation is to lead you away from where your security in the future really lies. It doesn't lie in your plans, but in God's plan. Your plans may fail. You may never realize the fulfillment of your plans. You may have a future you don't want. So don't be tempted to think that you are in charge of your future. "For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever."

So what have we learned from this temptation story? I think maybe this. Maybe this ought to be our hymn as we journey to Good Friday and Easter. This is our pilgrim song.

Be still, my soul: the Lord is on your side.
 Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
 Leave to your God to order and provide;
 In every change God faithful will remain.

Be still, my soul: your God will undertake
 To guide the future, as in ages past.
 Your hope, your confidence let nothing shake;
 All now mysterious shall be bright at last.

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
 that we might be servants of others,
 through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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