

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

March 6, 2022 (1st Sunday in Lent, Year C)
Luke 4:1-13

I read a story about a little boy named Bobby who, many, many years ago, desperately wanted a new bicycle. His plan was to save his nickels, dimes and quarters until he finally had enough to buy it. I DID say it was a LONG time ago. Each night he asked God to help him save his money. Kneeling beside his bed, he prayed, "Dear Lord, please help me save my money for a new bike, and please, Lord, don't let the ice cream man come down the street again tomorrow."

Reader's Digest told about someone ELSE who faced temptation. You may have heard this one before. An overweight businessman decided it was time to shed some excess pounds. He took his new diet seriously, even changing his DRIVING route to AVOID his favorite bakery. One morning, however, he showed up at work with a gigantic coffee cake. Everyone in the office scolded him, but his smile remained. "No, this is a SPECIAL coffee cake," he explained. "I ACCIDENTALLY drove BY the bakery this morning, and there in the window was a HOST of goodies. I felt it must be a sign, so I prayed, 'Lord, if you want me to HAVE one of those delicious coffee cakes, let there be a parking spot open, RIGHT in front.' And sure enough, the EIGHTH time around the block, THERE it was!"

But joking aside, temptation is in the NEWS a LOT. Politicians keep getting into trouble for using campaign contributions for personal spending sprees. Celebrities and athletes keep falling into affairs and addictions. It happens in the CHURCH too. Not long ago there was a headline that someone had taken over a million dollars from one of those mega churches. A few years back (2013) down in the Minneapolis Area Synod, in the ELCA, a member of the SYNOD STAFF, someone the BISHOP hired, had embezzled \$100,000 from the synod budget between 2005 and 2012.

Those are extreme examples, but ALL of us know what it is to get LOST...lost in the wilderness of temptation. Temptation is part of the human condition. That's WHY Jesus is LED into the wilderness in our Gospel today. In ORDER to REDEEM us, to SAVE us, he had to experience EVERYTHING we do, INCLUDING temptation. As the old theological arguments says, "What is NOT ASSUMED CANNOT be REDEEMED." Jesus had to be COMPLETELY human. As it says in Hebrews 4(:15): "For we 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."

Now, you could argue that this story doesn't LOOK like the temptation WE know. We don't have conversations with a VISIBLE devil; we aren't TRANSPORTED from place to place as JESUS is in the story. And the temptations that Jesus faces are particular to HIM. The AVERAGE person isn't tempted to turn stones into bread, to worship Satan, or to put God to the test by leaping from a CLIFF. THOSE temptations are pretty FAR from the kinds WE face day to day.

So some might say, "What about the temptations that are faced DAILY by the recovering alcoholic and substance abuser? The lonely divorcee? The struggling business owner? The teenager who covets peer acceptance more than anything? What does JESUS know about THOSE kinds of temptations."

But there IS a common denominator here, a common thread between OUR temptations and the tests JESUS faced. We all know the expression "Let it go and give it to God." Temptation is the OPPOSITE of that: "Hold ONTO it and do it YOURSELF." Or even WORSE: "Give UP and give it to SOMEONE else, or SOMETHING else."

We may not be tempted to turn stones into bread, but we are CONSTANTLY tempted to do things OURSELVES, to do it OUR way, as if we DON'T NEED God.

WORSHIPPING the devil is no MORE a temptation for us than it was for Jesus, but COMPROMISING our VALUES with the ways of the world is VERY seductive.

NONE of us is likely to put God to the test by leaping from a CLIFF, but we DO TEST God. We say, "God, if you REALLY EXIST, then get me OUT of this." "God, if you REALLY LOVE me, then DO THIS for me." We turn the PROMISES of God around to try to MANIPULATE God.

At every baptism in the Lutheran church an old question is asked, a question used at COUNTLESS baptisms all over the world, a question that is almost as old as the church itself. Just before water is splashed in the threefold name of God, I look at parents and sponsors and sometimes adult candidates across the water and ask: "Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God? Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God? Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you away from God?" The old hymnal asked it more simply: "Do you renounce all the forces of evil, the devil, and all his empty promises?"

To tell you the truth, I've been waiting for somebody to LAUGH at that question. A lot of people don't BELIEVE in the devil anymore. They've left him behind with their imaginary friend and the monster under the bed, relegating "evil" to more manageable and explainable psychoses that can be named and catalogued and treated, with a little PHARMACOLOGICAL help.

One seminary student approached his systematic theology professor and asked, "Do I really have to say that line about the devil and all his empty promises?" He'll never forget what his professor said. He smiled at his student and said, "Spend twenty years in parish ministry and come back and ask me that question AGAIN."

Oh, Satan is REAL and he IS POWERFUL. But just a side note here, Satan is NOT the LORD of this world, as he CLAIMS to be. He doesn't have the power to MAKE you do anything. That's just another one of his lies. He's called "the devil" for a reason: "devil" means "slanderer." He is the FATHER of lies. And he will SAY ANYTHING to TALK you into sin, to get you to CHOOSE to stray from the path. But he can't MAKE you do ANYTHING.

Do you renounce all the forces of evil, the devil, and all his empty promises? "I renounce them," we say.

Shortly after the Reformation, some young followers of Martin Luther wrote him with a question. They asked, "We are harassed by many temptations which appeal to us so often and so strongly that they give us no rest. YOU don't seem to be TROUBLED in this way and we should like to know your secret. Don't temptations bother you? Are you somehow immune to sin?"

Luther wrote them back, saying, "I, too, know something of temptation. But the difference is that when temptation comes knocking at the door of my heart, I always answer, 'Go away! This place is occupied. Go back where you came from, for CHRIST is here.' "

I'm reminded of an old expression. When a young woman had given her heart to a young man who was away, even if they weren't married yet, if she was asked out by someone else, she would say, "I'm spoken for." I like that. It meant that she knew WHO she was and to WHOM her heart belonged. "I'm spoken for."

Now, that DOESN'T MEAN that the antidote to temptation is JUST to be so FOCUSED on Christ, that there's no ROOM for temptation. Like, if you are HOLY enough, temptation won't even be in an ISSUE.

Don't FORGET that even JESUS was TEMPTED. To rely on your ability to FOCUS, even to focus on JESUS, is simply relying on YOURSELF again and your OWN strength.

JESUS didn't rely on his own strength. He rested in the POWER of the Holy Spirit. He took hold of Scripture and responded again and again that only GOD is God.

Resisting temptation ISN'T something WE can do by OURSELVES. We need HELP. We need JESUS. Only GOD is God, and he's WALKED in that wilderness already. He knows how POWERFUL temptation is. He knows how EASY it is to get lost. "We do not have a high priest who is UNABLE to sympathize with our weaknesses," the scripture said, but "one who in EVERY RESPECT has been tested as WE are."

Jesus WENT to the wilderness, so THAT he could walk BESIDE us, and GUIDE us OUT of the wilderness.

“Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God? When we say, “I renounce them,” we are saying, “I give my heart to the Father.”

“Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God?” When we say, “I renounce them,” we are saying, “I give my heart to the Son.”

Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you away from God?” When we say, “I renounce them,” we are saying, “I give my heart to the Holy Spirit.”

We say, “My heart is spoken for,” because only in our LORD do we STAND a CHANCE.
Amen.