

Sermon: "Temptation"

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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TEMPTATION

C.S. Lewis in his children's book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* told how a wicked queen enticed the boy, Edmund with a box of enchanted Turkish Delight. Each piece was sweet and delicious. Edmund had never tasted anything better.

There was only one problem. The more Edmund ate of this enchanted Turkish Delight, the more he wanted. He didn't know that this was the evil queen's plan. The more he ate, the more he would want ... and thus he would eat and eat until it killed him.

It would never satisfy his hunger. It would never fill him up. It would simply kill him.

Lewis was giving us a metaphor for sin and temptation. The more we partake. The more we give in. The more we want. It never satisfies. It only enslaves.

Temptation.

How do I avoid it? Most of us think that we know the answer to that question. Some of us grew up singing a hymn that went, "Yield not to temptation for yielding is sin." How do you avoid sin and temptation? Just say no. Just don't do it.

But, if it's that easy why do we have some many religious leaders embroiled in moral scandals? If it's that easy why are so many good, church going people making the wrong choices and destroying their lives?

A deacon in a large congregation called a church leader saying he had to talk. He said, "I have no one to talk to. Last week I discovered that our associate pastor has embezzled \$20,000 from the church. Yesterday, another associate has revealed that his wife is having an affair with our senior pastor."

The layman continued, "Here are two men who have been spiritual guides for me, mentors, better people than I. One explains to me why it was necessary for him to steal from the church. Another tells me why it was okay for him to betray his marriage vows. It does something to a layperson to hear that."

Now let me quickly add that this happened in a church of a different denomination ... "long, long ago and far, far away." But, sadly I must tell you that similar tragedies have occurred and continue to occur among ministers and leaders in our own denomination and in our own area.

Why do these things occur?

How can people we love and trust succumb to such temptation?

I like that old line, "I can resist everything but temptation." Apparently, there is more truth to that statement than we would like to admit. What is it about temptation that snares us? What is it about temptation that can get into the soul of even the most talented and committed person?

TEMPTATION AND GOD'S CALL

I believe that all of us are tempted, but, ironically, temptation is often strongest for the person who is serious about their faith. Temptation can be particularly powerful for the person who has a strong sense of God's call.

In the passage that precedes our lesson for today, Jesus received a great affirmation of his call. The skies were opened. The Holy Spirit descended like a dove upon Him. A voice from heaven said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Mark 1:11 (NRSV)

But, in today's lesson from Mark's Gospel, there is no time to bask in this revelation. Immediately Jesus is "driven" into the wilderness by the Spirit, the wilderness of temptation. As one preacher put it, "This Spirit has talons, claws."

The call of God is a great responsibility. The call of God places us in the place where great decisions must be made. The stakes are raised considerably when God places His hand upon us.

As it was with Jesus, so it is with us.

He was cast out into the wilderness of temptation. For forty days he was tempted by Satan and the "wild beasts" were with him.

Mark tells the story of the temptation differently from the other evangelists. Mark's story is much shorter. Mark, in contrast to the other evangelists, doesn't tell us any details about what the temptations were and how Jesus responded to them.

And more importantly, Mark doesn't end the temptation story with Jesus casting out Satan and moving triumphantly ahead to do God's will.

William Lane in his commentary on Mark writes, "It is significant that Mark does not report the victory of Jesus over Satan, nor the end of the temptation. It is the evangelist's distinctive understanding that Jesus did not win the decisive victory during the forty days nor did he cease to be tempted his whole Gospel constitutes the explanation of the manner in which Jesus was tempted."

In other words, all of Jesus' life was a time of trial and temptation. At any moment, there was the possibility that Jesus would choose the wrong way. If you read the Gospel of Mark carefully, you can hear the subtle call of temptation throughout the story. And the temptation was always basically the same ... the temptation to bring in the kingdom using the world's way of doing things trusting in political power and money instead of trusting in God's power and will.

For example, in the eighth chapter of Mark, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do the people say I am?" According to the disciples, the answers varied. Some thought he was a prophet. Some thought he was a person of great power. But, then Jesus asked his disciples a more personal question, "What about you? Who do you say that I am?" And the disciple Peter answered, "You are the Messiah.."

That's a high point in the Gospel. The identity of Jesus is out.

Peter must have swelled with pride.

But, then Jesus began talking about what title meant. He would not be the conquering hero that the people expected. His way would be a way of suffering and pain. Salvation would not come by way of glory but by way of the cross.

Peter rebuked Jesus like a teacher would scold a recalcitrant student. Peter couldn't imagine a Messiah being anything but a political hero of great power and influence.

And Jesus told Peter,

"Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Mark 8:33 (NRSV)

How did this happen? How did Peter go from receiving divine inspiration about the identity of Jesus at one moment to being the "devil" the next? Peter did not understand the power of temptation the temptation to take a divine message and then fill that message with our own desires instead of God's will.

Are we less likely to fall than Peter? I don't think so. I think that we too often choose the wrong way with the best of intentions. We too often succumb to the subtle temptation of "adapting" God's plan to fit our desires.

We should not underestimate the power of temptation in our lives. Our story is also fraught with the possibility of tragically choosing a terribly wrong way. And often, when we make that wrong choice, we even justify it as "will of God."

Don't kid yourself. We too live in a wilderness. We too live in a place of danger.

Self-deception is a potent weapon in the devil's arsenal. But, we are called to be a holy people. And that means we are called to resist temptation. We are called to hear some

other voice than just the voice of our own desire. We are called to hear God's voice reminding us that we are God's children and that we have a job to do in His kingdom.

WILD BEASTS

The temptation story in Mark is also unique in its emphasis upon wild beasts being with Jesus. I take these wild beasts to be symbolic of the dangers that lie in the wilderness of temptation.

Remember when Cain was thinking about killing his brother Able? God told Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." Genesis 4:6-7 (NIV)

I love that phrase. It describes the ever present danger of temptation. It is "crouching at the door." Temptation is a "wild beast" crouching at the door of every heart.

I think about that poor child who was attacked recently by a dog that was not properly trained and cared for by its owner. Things get out of hand when a dog owner does not take responsibility for his or her dog. And so it is when we do not take responsibility for the temptations which crouch at our door. Something very bad can happen.

I'm not trying to be overly pessimistic on this point. I'm just trying to be realistic.

Temptation is always crouching at the door. There is always the possibility that a brilliant career can be ruined by one careless moment.

There is always the possibility that we can miss God's call because His voice is drowned out by the howling of the wolves of Wall Street whose only value is that of money and power. There is always the possibility that the call of God can be drowned out by the wolves of desire whose only value is personal satisfaction now.

What happens to those who try to warn this present age of the destructiveness of their sinful ways? The philosopher Kierkegaard asked that question and answered it with a parable.

It seems that a fire broke out in a theater. The clown came out to inform the public. They thought it was a jest and applauded. He repeated his warning, but that made the crowd shout their jeers even louder. The people died because they thought the warning was a joke.

So, Kierkegaard concluded, I think this world will come to an end amid general applause from all the wits who believe it is joke.

I can't help but think about that recent fire in the nightclub when people thought that the flames on the wall were just a "part of the act." When we become too accustomed to the ways of the world, we are not attuned to the dangers of temptation. Temptation is not something to be avoided. It becomes normal. It is just a part of the act.

But, friends, I come here today to tell you that the warning about temptation is not a part of the act. By virtue of who we are called to be in Christ Jesus, all of us are cast out into the wilderness of temptation. We live in a land of hard choices where the difference between sheep and wolves are not always apparent.

ANGELS

But, notice that when Jesus was in the wilderness of temptation the wild beast were not the only ones there. According to our lesson from Mark, there is more to the wilderness of temptation than just the wild beasts. We read in verse 13 of our lesson for today, "He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." Mark 1:13 (NRSV)

In the wilderness of temptation, there are angels as well as wolves. The angels ministered to Jesus while he was in the wilderness of temptation. In the same way, angels minister to us as we seek to avoid the temptations that lurk at every turn. Angels by definition are

those who bring God's message to the world. And I believe that there are people who do just that for each and every one of us every day of our life.

Who are the angels in your life?

Who ministers to you when you are tempted to make the wrong choice? I bet the name of someone comes to mind. Who encourages you and gives you courage when the wolves of the world howl and threaten to overtake you? I bet there is someone who comes to mind. These are God's angels. And they are here for all of us simultaneously shouting for our soul even as the wolves of temptation lurk at the door to our heart. We are not alone in the struggle. God and God's messengers are with us. When the wolf of temptation is crouching at the door and our world falls down around us, God is still with us in the struggle. God is still there to pull us from the rubble of our lives and save us.

OUR FATHER IS WITH US

In 1989 an earthquake caused great devastation in Armenia. The deadly tremor killed over 30,000 people in less than four minutes.

In the middle of all the confusion of the earthquake, a father left his wife securely at home and rushed to his son's school. When he arrived at the school, he discovered that the building was as flat as a pancake.

Standing there looking at what was left of the school the father remembered the promise he made to his son, "No matter what, I'll always be there for you." Tears began to fill his eyes. It looked like a hopeless situation, but he could not take his mind off of his promise.

He remembered that his son's classroom was in the back right corner of the building. The father rushed there and started digging through the rubble. As he was digging other grieving parents arrived, clutching their hearts and saying, "My son! My daughter!"

Other well meaning parents tried to pull him off of what was left of the school saying, "It's too late. They're dead. Go home." Even a police officer and a fire fighter told him he should go home.

But, courageously he proceeded alone because he needed to know for himself if his boy was dead or alive. The man dug for eight hours then for twelve hours and then for twenty four hours and then for thirty six hours.

Finally, in his thirty eighth hour as he pulled back a boulder he heard his son's voice.

"Armand!"

And a voice answered, "Dad? It's me dad."

Then the boy added these priceless words, "I told the other kids not to worry. I told them that if you were alive, you'd save me and when you saved me, they'd be saved. You promised, 'No matter what, I'll always be there for you! You did it dad.'"

Unlike this father, even with the best of intentions, we can't always make good on our promises. But, God, our Heavenly Father can make good on his promises. We need not fear the greatest temptation or evil.

No matter what lurks at our door, God's ability to save is greater than the world's ability to destroy.

The Bible tells us that just as Christ was raised from the dead, so we who abide in Christ will be raised. Don't fear the wilderness friends. There are angels as well as wild beasts.

There is the power of God as well as the power of Evil. And God has promised to save us.

But, do not be deceived. There will be a struggle.

There will be a wilderness of temptation for all of us. And every day we will be required to make a choice between God's way and some other way.

May God help us choose his way.

May we not be led into temptation.

Amen.

