

Temptation and the Tempter  
A Sermon for March 5, 2017  
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-8; Matthew 4:1-11

We read three texts today that are quite closely related. In Genesis 2, the first man is given one command-- only one. In Genesis 3, he breaks that one command. The story that the Bible tells is that because of that breaking of the commandment, death entered the human race. By sinning, humanity separated itself from God, who is the source of life.

This came about in part because Adam was tempted by Satan. Jesus, too, would be tempted by Satan. But in the words of one scholar, “where Adam disobeyed God and followed Satan, Jesus obeyed God and sent Satan away.”<sup>1</sup> This story of Jesus’ victory over Satan’s temptation is what we see in Matthew chapter 4. The Romans reading, for its part, makes a direct comparison between Adam and Christ. Paul says that “Adam foreshadows the man who was to come.”

But it’s more than that. It’s not just that God put humans back on the right track with Christ. It’s that God has done far, far more good in Christ for humanity than Adam did bad for humanity. Christ does so much more than avoid evil. Christ is obedient in every way, not just in managing to stay within the boundaries that God has set up, but also by being faithful to the work that God had given him to do, initiating the kingdom of God with his presence and by his death.

Here is our goal: to be faithful to the work that God has given us. And so that we can avoid the traps that come our way in life, the scripture presses us to consider how temptation works, and particularly that temptation which comes from “the tempter”-- that is the devil. We

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<sup>1</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 69

don't like to talk about the devil because the devil doesn't fit in with our modern worldview. But the great and frequently-quoted C. S. Lewis said in the preface to the Screwtape Letters that there are two equal and opposite errors that we can have when it comes to the demonic forces. "One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them."

If you have trouble wrapping your head around the devil, just think of it this way, just as the entity behind good is God, the entity behind evil is the devil. In our baptismal covenant as United Methodists, we don't mention the devil specifically, but we "renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness" and "reject the evil powers of this world." Even in the Lord's Prayer itself, we pray "deliver us from evil," which is a good prayer. But the Greek text of Matthew 6:13, where that phrase comes from, actually says, "deliver us from *the evil one*"-- that is, the devil.

So the devil is real. But fear not. He's evil, but he's really not all that powerful. What's more, scripture essentially gives us the enemy's playbook so that we can (1) know what's coming, (2) know what his tricks are, and (3) have a strategy to counter. Let's take those points one by one.

We need to know what's coming. What's coming is a temptation to do something that God has prohibited, or not to do something that God has commanded. That's temptation. Adam was tempted. Jesus is tempted. And given enough time, every human (...every... human) is tempted.

First we need to understand that temptation is not the same thing as sin. This is a very important distinction. Hebrews chapter 4 tells us that Jesus was tempted in every way that we are, and yet he didn't sin. Temptation is simply to consider one's ability to do something that's outside of God's will. Doing evil, or sinning, on the other hand, is

actually *doing* what is against God's will. God only wills what is good. And so whatever God doesn't will is evil. So any time that God gives us a command, the possibility for temptation arises.

But more specifically, when is temptation likely? Let's notice when Jesus gets assaulted by Satan. It's immediately following his baptism. The voice comes from heaven and says, "This is my Son." And the Spirit descends on him. At his baptism, Jesus was given confirmation of his identity. And seeing as he immediately begins his ministry after leaving the wilderness, we can conjecture that Jesus was also given a sense of his vocation-- what his job was to be.

Jesus is about to embark on the journey to doing the most important ministry anyone has ever done. This is when Satan attacks: when the potential for good is the highest. When we're not doing good, Satan can just sit back and let us think he doesn't exist. There's not anything he needs to battle against. But as soon as the possibility of good arises, that's when he has to strike. And so any time there is a potential for good, there is also a potential for evil.

Ok, so that's what's coming. Prepare yourselves. In our humanity, we will be tempted. And we will be tempted the strongest when we are able to do the most good.

So next, let's look at the playbook. What are the tricks that the devil uses to tempt us?

What are the first words that the devil says to Jesus? "*If* you are the Son of God..." A voice from heaven just said he was the son of God when he was baptized! But the devil wants Jesus to doubt his God-given identity. The devil wants *us* to doubt our God-given identity. Even though Jesus is God's Son in a special, unique way, every person who is baptized is declared to be a child of God. This must be received in faith. All the most important things in life require faith. But if something

requires faith, then it means that it's also open being doubted. So Trick #1: The devil will tempt you to doubt your God-given identity. Prepare yourselves, my brothers and sisters. You belong to God. Believe that. I heard someone say recently that the devil wants us to believe our doubts and doubt our beliefs, but that the opposite is true with God: God wants us to doubt our doubts and believe our beliefs.

Let's jump back to the Genesis story. One of the devil's primary jobs is to cast doubt on God's word. In chapter 2, God tells the man "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden." The devil, through the snake, says "Did God really say don't eat from any tree in the garden?" "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." There's the half-truth. Their eyes will be opened all right, but all they will see is their own nakedness.

Let's look more at the content of Jesus' temptations. Jesus has been fasting for 40 days, so he's *really* hungry. Jesus isn't the only person in the Bible to fast for 40 days. Moses did it when he was on Mount Sinai with God. Elijah did to on his way to the mountain. I actually personally know two people who has fasted for all of Lent, although they had at least some broth for food.

Now, hunger brings temptation. That's part of the reason that Christians fast-- to train themselves to withstand temptation. When I'm hungry, my temptation is to get *hangry*. But when Jesus is hungry, his temptation is to make bread out of rocks. It sounds crazy, but do we really doubt that Jesus could have done it? Jesus' overarching temptation is to abuse his God-given power for personal ends rather than for the purposes of God. God is not a divine butler. God is not there to serve the Son. The Son is there to serve God.

Finally, let's talk about how we deal with temptation. In Jesus' temptations, the devil doesn't lie simply and clearly. The devil actually quotes scripture in order to lie! We can't get around the reality that if we are going to withstand temptations, we have to know scripture-- plain and simple. How do we get to know scripture? Hearing it in church is good-- so being here regularly is a good thing. Studying it with other Christians is helpful too. So take advantage of Sunday school or bible study opportunities. But the reality is that there is no substitute for doing the hard work ourselves. One of the best things that you can do to withstand temptation is to spend time daily with Scripture. It's hard to stress too much how important this is. The devil quotes scripture out of context. But Jesus quotes places where Israel faced temptation in the wilderness. Being able to quote some scripture isn't enough-- we need to understand its shape and God's character.

I made a couple of reading plans for Lent that might be helpful to you. They're on the blog on [lansdowneumc.org](http://lansdowneumc.org). I know that there are people who have trouble reading the bible. It can definitely be difficult at times. But in general, people find that the more they read it, the clearer it becomes. If reading it yourself is difficult for you, for sight or other reasons, did you know that there are places online where you can listen to the bible for free? The web site Biblegateway, for example, has quite a few audio bibles. The *temptation*, if you will, is to think that you can't do it, for one reason or another.

The second way we endure temptation is to pray. Jesus teaches us to pray, "Deliver us from the evil one."

This all feeds into the best way to avoid falling into temptation: a life-giving relationship with God. Fasting and prayer always go together in scripture, so you can bet that Jesus was praying.

So we pause on this first Sunday of Lent to take a look at the temptations we're facing in our own lives. And, as we face these temptations, we turn to our savior who not only knows what it is to be tempted, but has shown us how to withstand temptation. God tells us, "I've called you by name, you are mine." So in the face of temptation, we turn to God. As we prepare our hearts for communion, we are reminded that he is the bread of life. He gives us all we need.