

Year B, Lent 1  
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“He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan...”

I hope your first couple of days of Lent have been good ones. Today we are going to talk about temptation. I hope that doesn't change your mood too much.

So the scene is very familiar. Jesus is baptized, God's voice booms down, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased,” and with the immediacy that we see across St. Mark's gospel, the Spirit drove Him into the wilderness where He was tempted by Satan for 40 days.

Now we are not going to get too deep into the nature of Satan. Besides talking about evangelism, you know, inviting a friend to church, nothing makes Episcopalians more uncomfortable than the whole notion of Satan. For today's purposes, just consider Satan the embodiment of all that is not of God. Where God gives us a healthy appetite, Satan perverts it into gluttony. Where our beloved can stir our affections, Satan bends our desire into lust. Righteous anger becomes violent rage in the Evil One's twisted gnarled hands. Satan is the symbolic, narrative embodiment of the very true reality of sin in the world.

Satan works on us in many ways, we each have our own special weakness, that gap in our spiritual armor that the Evil One knows how to exploit. Fear, loneliness, anger, delusion, grasping attachment... And how do those conditions lead us down the slippery slopes to perdition? Let us count the ways! No, we don't have time for that today. There are many, many ways Satan gets to us, many ways the lesser angels of our natures manifest in our lives. What the aspect of Satan's agency in the world that is important for today, the first Sunday in Lent, is opened up for us in the Gospel and also in the collect of the day: *Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord.* That is what we need to talk about today: Temptation. (I feel like a fire and brimstone preacher just saying that word in a pulpit. Fortunately, for all of us, I am *not* very fire and brimstone-y, nor could I be if I tried, and a music stand in Bill's garage doesn't quite cut it as a pulpit for pounding, but still...) Temptation.

Temptation; we are all plagued by it, everyone, from Jesus all the way down. Spiritually, religiously, we can say that temptation flows from Satan. In fact, one of the words translated as Satan in scripture is “the Tempter.” But how does it happen? How does it arise in us?

Temptation can arise physiologically: think puberty. Unexpected memories and fantasies can arise. Emotional excitement of all kinds can bring it up. Temptation can also, as one theologian succinctly puts it, “result from human disappointment through others, the experience of one’s own limitations, false ideas about the will of God, and other factors of the super-ego and of the environment, none of which are directly subject to control.”

Now there is a key point there: we are not responsible for temptation. It is just a fact of life. Jesus spoke of having lustful thoughts as being as sinful as acting on them. It is not the occurrence of lustful thoughts that is sinful (or jealous, violent, spiteful ones.), it is what you do with those thoughts that is. Sinful thoughts, like temptations, enter our consciousness all the time... it is what we do with them that matters.

Say you hear someone or something on the radio that makes you angry, and your first thoughts go to a sinful place. That is a very natural reaction to an enemy. It is natural. But if you then fantasize about the harm you will do to them, or what you hope someone else does to them... therein is the sin.

Temptation is the same. Something crosses your path that you desire... let’s say a chocolate cake. Chocolate cake is good. As Julia Child said, “A party without a cake is just a meeting.” But in your case, maybe your cardiologist, or your Lenten promise, or the year’s bathing suit goal is not compatible with chocolate cake, no matter how silky, rich, and tasty you imagine it might be. That is temptation. That is not a sin. The sin would come in eating a slice of the cake you swore off.

Temptation comes in as many forms as there are people. What tempts you might repulse me, but there are some patterns of temptation that might be discerned.

First there is the temptation of things, physical things, sensations that we want, things with which we have disordered attachments. In the same species are aversions, things we want far from us. We might be tempted by wealth, the averse counterpart might be being a rejection of financial limitations. Embodied things, the things we “must have” or “must discard if not destroy” this is a site of temptation. What things tempt you?

Another site of temptation is our inner life, our attention. We are scatty creatures, we humans. The distraction crowds find in shiny objects pales in comparison to the lengths we humans go to waste the precious time we are given. This is in our inner, emotional realm, The 20<sup>th</sup> century divine Evelyn Underhill describes this in *The Fruits of the Spirit* as “...all the clutch and feverishness of desire...” Think of all the temptation that seeps into our inner world, what it does to our priorities.

What is actually important becomes unimportant, while the trivial dominates. What tempts you away from what is important?

Another site of temptation is the temptation of the will. That we want to be and do things that we cannot or ought not be and do. How often do we join Jesus in truly saying, “Not my will, but thine be done”? Not nearly often enough. Not in any of our lives. Where do you see a gap between what God would have of us and what you want to give? Where are you tempted to follow your will, not God’s?

Trying to categorize things like sites of human temptation isn’t always helpful. I went there to provide a bit of symmetry with the remedy for the temptation problem. Yes, Christianity has a tried and true practice to save us from temptation, help us keep steady hands on the tiller of life. Now traditionally, this practice has been reserved for the religious, that is monastics, but the writing of Evelyn Underhill, whom I mentioned a minute ago, is very helpful. So monastic discipline... any guesses what formula of practice I am speaking of?

Poverty. Chastity. Obedience. The evangelical counsels. And they are a gift of our own patron, St. Francis of Assisi.

Now in a monastic way, those disciplines are taken quite literally. Poverty: manifesting in many degrees, from actual poverty, not having enough, living from begging, to just having limits on personal possessions. Chastity: this is not just abstention from sexual activity, it is also eschewing intimate personal relationships (such as marriage), preserving purity of thought and intent by putting God and vocation first. And Obedience: Following the orders of your superiors, the community’s rule of life, vows taken, promises made.

So am I suggesting that we take on vows of poverty, chastity and obedience? No. I really like being married, thank you very much. And it is very good for me, and I hope for my family, and it helps my vocation and through that, God willing, the world. But what I am saying, is that ascetic practices like Poverty, Chastity and Obedience can be adapted to our lives. Asceticism is all about denying sensual pleasures for spiritual purposes. I don’t think we need to deny sensual pleasures, not all of them at least, but where those pleasures intersect with our being, where we encounter the ubiquitous state of Temptation, is a very interesting and important place to relate to God, to learn about ourselves in relation to God, to learn about God.

What does a practice of Poverty look like in daily life? Where your treasure is, your heart will be also. Do *things* distract you? Do you spend more time managing your possessions, your money than you do helping others? Have you entered dubious battles, made questionable moral

decisions to preserve your station in life? Has your freedom been restricted by the encumbrance of the material world? Has it kept others away? Underhill writes, “the dropping for love’s sake of the many things we feel we ‘must have’ is a great help in the way of the Spirit...” this “frees us from possession and passiveness and does away with the clutch of ‘the I, the Me and the Mine’ upon our souls.” Sometimes we are so full, our lives are so full of things, we can feel so dependent on these material supports that we forget that we have nothing apart from the grace of God.

So what about chastity? Underhill and I follow Paul in his argument that circumcision is not required to be a Christian. (That requirement was murder on evangelism efforts). Sexual expression is the property of marriage and marriage is a commendable vocation for Christians. Marriage can be the site of procreation, it can be a place of joy, mutual support, and most importantly, it is where many of us are best able to practice *agape*, pure, self-less love. Bring it on!

Chastity, again in Underhill’s words, “really means the spirit of poverty applied to our emotional life – all the clutch and feverishness of desire, the ‘I want’ and ‘I must have’ taken away and replaced by absolute single-mindedness, purity of heart.” Chastity is all about intent, priorities, to whom or what we give our attention to.

Isn’t your attention a major site of temptation? The most valuable piece of real estate in the world is your attention, your mind’s eye. Billions are spend trying to colonize it. How much time did I waste yesterday reading memes about Andrew Cuomo’s deception and Ted Cruz’s Mexican adventure while I was supposed to be writing this sermon?

How do you spend your time? That is probably a good exercise to do, to catalogue how you spend an average day, and average week. How much time do you spend sleeping, gathering, preparing and eating food, in front of a screen, being physically active, engaged with people you love, serving others, praying? How much of your time is mindfully spent? Have you ever been close to matching St. Paul’s injunction to pray ceaselessly? Where are you tempted away from things that deserve your attention, like your earthly responsibilities, people you love, God? Now that’s a whole different way to consider chastity; not sexual purity, but intent-ional, attention-al hygiene. I don’t know about you, but I need to consider that in my life.

And then there is obedience. This is not obedience to an abbess or bishop. This is not about obeying another human being, even your wife. It is not about obedience to the teachings of Jesus or scripture or the Church. Well, it doesn’t have to be. This is all about obedience to God. It is all about discerning and following the will of God.

For some of us, we learn to submit to God by practicing submission to earthly things. This is a risky and likely necessary step in our spiritual ascent. Following orders, either within a civil, ecclesial or family systems; or, following the directions of scripture and church teachings, doctrines, rules of life can teach us how to follow a will other than our own, can help us resist the temptation to do whatever we want to do. Having no limits, no accountability rarely brings the best out of us.

Poverty. Chastity. Obedience. I am not suggesting that you take on these traditional vows as a Lenten practice. (Though if you want to make your secular friends uncomfortable, you can tell them you are). What I am suggesting is that the church has a long history and highly developed practices to resist the myriad temptations that Satan puts in our way all the time. I am suggesting that one of the ways we make room for God in our lives is to pay attention to, maybe clean up what it is we call our lives. The things we are surrounded by. The attention, the focus we have to give. Our own wills in relation to God's. This is all food for the journey.

We end with the words of St. Anselm of Canterbury, from a canticle we use at Morning Prayer:

Lord Jesus, in your mercy, heal us; \*

in your love and tenderness, remake us.

In your compassion, bring grace and forgiveness, \*

for the beauty of heaven, may your love prepare us. AMEN