

***“Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.”*** (Matt. 4.10)

When I walk into the Boyce Market every Saturday morning, you might say that I am *tempted* to eat everything in sight. There are so many things to eat: cheeses, breads, pastries, and meats inside and all sorts of hot, prepared foods outside. I think you know what I mean when I say that. We use this word, *“tempted”*, often to indicate a lack of self-control in some way. We use it to express our *desire* for something when we ourselves, or perhaps somebody else, has told us it may not be a good idea. I am *tempted* to buy a new car, I am *tempted* to paint the kitchen red, I am *tempted* to go on a cleaning spree this morning. To some degree, in our use, when we say these phrases out loud, we already have decided that we’re going to do it. “I’m tempted to buy this shirt” is sometimes just another way of saying “I am going to buy this shirt, but do you like it?”

What, then, is the difference between temptation and desire in this meaning? It is, as I have already alluded, because something or someone has told us we *shouldn’t* do the thing. To know that something is wrong, we must have been told that it is wrong. Maybe if you shouldn’t eat something, it’s because you are on a medically recommended diet and you know that those extra calories or sugar might trigger a reaction, or if you shouldn’t buy something it’s because you already are in way over your head in credit card debt. There always is something that is the *standard* that we measure against – but whether we follow it or not is the difference.

From a Biblical point of view, this standard is given to us from God. At the beginning of the story, in Genesis, we read that God told Adam and Eve not to do one thing – eat from the one tree. Later, we read that God gave Moses the Law in the Ten Commandments and the latter parts of the book of Exodus and in Leviticus. And in the New Testament, St. Paul writes about how Jesus embodies and fulfills the Law and gives the Church a new commandment sourced in Love and Grace. In each of these cases, the standard is set, and then humankind doesn’t meet the standard as the Law defines it. This gap, between the standard and our reality, is where we find what we call Sin. I am, of course, oversimplifying, but a Sin is any transgression against the divine law. So, when at the Last Supper Jesus gives the command “to love one another as I have loved you”, any action we take that is neglectful of our love for one another is a sinful act.

Often, we have help, or encouragement, in making a sinful decision, and this is where the theological understanding of temptation comes in. We heard today in the Old Testament lesson of the original Sin: Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit of the tree that God told them not to touch. How did they get to this decision? They were deceived by a force of evil: the crafty snake, whom we understand to be the devil, convinced Eve that death would not come to them if they ate of the tree. Eve and Adam both knew what the Lord had said, but it didn’t take a whole lot of convincing for them to eat the fruit anyway. They were tempted, they were pushed ever so slightly over the edge until they made their own decision, the sinful decision. This is our Human condition. It doesn’t take much for us to fall from being righteous before the Lord. We are broken by our very nature, and all it takes is a little push.

In our Gospel this morning, we hear of a different temptation: that of Jesus. Jesus, who just before this chapter was revealed as the Son of God at his Baptism, was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted. Jesus was being put to the test. He grew up in a Jewish house, knew the Jewish Law, understood that he was God’s Son, and knew how he was to die. The tempter came to him to try and push him over the edge: to try and get Jesus to break, to try to get an “in” where he might be able to corrupt this obviously important man. But Jesus was not just any man. He was the Son of God, who was incapable of sin by his very nature, because he was to be the one perfect human for the sake of all others. We are told in both this account from the Gospel according to Matthew and from Luke that Jesus faced three main temptations. First was to command that stones were to be made bread; Second, to cast himself off the height of the temple so he might be saved by angels; and third, “I will give you all the things you can see if you fall down and worship me”, the devil says.

Compare these temptations to the story of Adam and Eve and there are parallels that draw strong contrasts. The temptation to turn stones into bread was a temptation of the senses much like the fruit of the forbidden tree. Jesus was hungry, Matthew tells us, so the prospect of food would have been appealing. The fruit of the tree, being forbidden, brings a certain appeal, too. As with all the temptations of our senses, it doesn't seem like such a great leap to reach out and touch it, even if we're not supposed to. Just like a child in a store full of shiny, fragile objects who has been told not to touch anything. Jesus is not swayed. "He Who fed five thousand by a miracle after one day's fasting, will not work a miracle to feed Himself after a fast of forty days."<sup>1</sup> His time has not yet come.

The temptation to throw himself off the highest point of the temple was for Jesus "to make a premature and unnecessary display of His Divine Power".<sup>2</sup> This was similar to the intellectual temptation set before our first parents, for them to be like God. The tempter was trying to get Jesus to show his hand, by seeing if he really was *all that* – "can God really do this?" Jesus replies, "you shall not tempt the Lord your God."

Thirdly, "the first Adam was tempted to covet the gift of a Divine Intelligence, 'Ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil;' and though God had given him sovereignty over the world in His own way, by a delegated authority, [he aimed] to seek it in another way, by the possession of Omniscience. So, the third and strongest temptation offered to Him Who came to draw all men unto Him by His lifting up was contained in the offer... 'All these things will I give Thee.'"<sup>3</sup>

Jesus, the Second Adam, was not pushed over the edge by these three temptations. The first Adam was, as doubtless all of us would be. But Jesus is different. He did not fall into these temptations. The tempter knew that he was the Son of God, and he wanted to put him to the test. How much easier is it for him to provoke us? "Jesus had refused to relieve his hunger by miraculously turning stones to bread; now he is fed supernaturally. He had refused to throw himself off the temple heights in the hope of angelic help; now angels feed him. He had refused to take a shortcut to inherit the kingdom of the world; now he fulfills Scripture by beginning his ministry and announcing the kingdom in Galilee of the Gentiles."<sup>4</sup>

Jesus, the Son of God, the God-man, was led out into the desert to face temptation by the Spirit. Where have we been led by the Spirit?

What kind of trials have we faced?

Have we been led into the desert?

How and where?

These are all the kinds of questions that we can be asking ourselves as we hunker down into this Lenten season. Yes, there is opportunity for personal growth. Yes, there is opportunity for a more rigorous devotional life. Yes, there is so much opportunity for so much more – but where do we find God in it all? How do we connect ourselves to Our Lord and Saviour Christ? We must ask these questions and try to feel that connection in all that we do, all the interactions that we have. Jesus faced temptation for us so that he would be the perfect sacrifice for all that we fail to do, but Jesus also was an example to us. As we make this journey to the Cross this Lenten season, let us approach nearer to God, nearer to Jesus. This nearness, this awareness, can be uncomfortable. It can sit on us like a scratchy wool sweater. But let it itch until we start asking questions about why it's itching. What does it mean for us to draw nearer to God, to be enveloped by his love?

Let us, then, this Lenten season, be eager to distinguish between the leadings of the Spirit and the temptations of the evil one. Let us ask for Jesus' intervention, his guidance and his wisdom, to help us make this distinction and follow the right path and hold us back when we are about to be pushed over the edge. We don't know where we are being led, but we trust God's grace to show us the way to eternal life – for it is by God's grace that all things are possible. Let us then not receive the grace of God in vain (2 Cor. 6.1).

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> John Henry Blunt, ed., "First Sunday in Lent" in *The Annotated Book of Common Prayer* (London: Rivingtons, 1884).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 114–115.