

Lent I

“*Jesus Encounters Temptation*”

February 10, 2008

Dr. Mickey Anders, pastor at *Six Flags over Jesus*, tells the story about the salesman who finally had his chance to make the really Big Sale. He was going into the final interview on the biggest contract he had ever written in his life. As he was ushered into the office of the executive buyer, an assistant brought in coffee and then left. The atmosphere was cordial, and he knew he had to give his best presentation ever.

Then the assistant tapped on the door, re-entered the office and spoke briefly with the executive. She stood and said, “*I apologize, but I have to tend to a matter. I’ll just be a minute or two.*” And she followed her assistant out of the room.

The sales rep. looked around the beautifully appointed office. He saw her family pictures on her desk. Then he noticed a contract on her desk. She had evidently been studying a bid from a competitor. Leaning forward, he could see the column of figures, but it was obscured by a **diet soda can**.

He was tempted to move the can and see the bottom line of his competitor's bid. What harm possibly could there be in reading her private information? After all, she had left it out in plain sight . . . almost. After wrestling with himself a while, he finally decided to take a peek.

As he lifted the soda can, he discovered that the can wasn't filled with soda at all. Instead it was a bottomless can filled with 1,000 BBs which gushed out, and ran all over the desk and cascaded onto the carpet.

His attempt to short cut the competition was exposed!

Not every temptation we face is so obvious. Not every failure is so embarrassing. But every temptation is a challenge. And in today’s Gospel we find that not even Jesus was spared His own encounter with temptation.

Howard Thurman, in his book, *The Inward Journey*, makes the following statement: “*THERE IS NOTHING more exhausting than the constant awareness that our life is being lived at cross-purposes.*”

What he meant by that is that in temptation, we are always working against ourselves. We are living in cross-purposes!

We know from Matthew’s Gospel that Jesus was led into the wilderness following his baptism. He didn’t wander aimlessly into the wilderness. He was LED there! At His baptism, it was confirmed that his life had a purpose and was part of God's plan. But it was in the midst of these temptations that Jesus was able to reflect upon and clarify the meaning of His life, his mission and his future ministry.

I think it is safe to say that we all fight some of our greatest battles, when we are alone. Being alone and in our own wilderness place, we find that temptation seems to be an unavoidable experience. When we are in the wilderness we are forced to focus upon ourselves -- our needs, our desires, our failures, our goals and our preferences.

Do you have those reflective moments in your life . . . you could be sitting in a hospital waiting room . . . you could be out fishing in a boat . . . you could be mowing the lawn . . . or you could just be sitting quietly reflecting as you stare outside the window!

These are moments of being confronted with ourselves, and they are opportunities to clarify what it is that we really want or desire. Thurman says: *“At long last, the only redemption from the paralysis of the cross-purpose, is to deal with all possible intent, to link one's deepest desire with one's choice of goal, and to make of one's life a dedication to such an end.”*

- So what is your "deepest desire"? And what goal does this desire inspire?
- What does it mean to dedicate your life to its achievement?
- Is our desire to be followers of God through Jesus Christ? What goal does such a desire imply?
- How does our dedication to such in end express itself in daily living?

These are the kinds of questions that are raised sharply when we are in the wilderness experiences of our lives.

I would like to share several ways of viewing the temptations of Jesus from a variety of perspectives. Hopefully, these descriptions will help to understand temptation and why it attacks our vulnerabilities.

As Jesus encountered temptation, it is important to remember that temptation for Him and for us involves a shift away from the questions identity and purpose . . . back to basic human needs and desires. Jesus was tempted by 3 basic needs: food, dependency, and loyalty & power.

The temptations of Jesus were not in being hungry, or feeling dependent, or giving loyalty or wanting power. The temptations had to do with the way in which He would choose to be fed. It's the way in which He would deal with dependency. It's the way in which He would give His loyalty and use His capacities. They are the same for us!

- **We all need bread to live and survive.** But we also hunger for things that bread alone cannot satisfy. These are the hungers of the spirit and mind. How we cultivate the spirit of God within us and nurture our minds . . . contributes to the kind of persons we are and become.

- **We cannot live without being dependent upon other people and God.** But we have to pay attention to where in our lives, we defy our dependence upon God and the laws of God's creation. If we reject the ways in which dependence is a blessing, then we are setting the stage for our own demise. Our insights must also be informed by our experiences with being vulnerable and dependent.
- **We are tempted to give our loyalty to people or situations that promise to give us power in return.** But whatever god we worship is the god who will hold us accountable. The true God, who was revealed through Jesus Christ, gives us the capacity to hold onto our own souls and not sell them for the delusions that power can create. Our power comes from the God who has laid claim on the way we live our lives. Our integrity flows from the clarity we have about our commitments and how we understand, use and value power.

Henri Nouwen wrote a book entitled, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*. And in this book, he interprets the three encounters Jesus had with the devil in the wilderness. He describes them as the temptations to be **relevant, to be spectacular, and to be powerful**.

Anyone in a position of leadership can identify with the temptation of wanting to do the “right thing” for any occasion, of wanting to carry out our functions in a way that evokes a sense of awe and wonder among the constituents, wanting to receive recognition and ultimately more authority and power. As pastors, we love to hear these words, “Pastor, you preach such wonderful sermons . . . you always know just what to say . . . you are such a wonderful leader for our church.” For these kingdoms of this world, it is a great temptation to compromise our core values in order to be adored by our people!

It is not enough to just say “NO” to the temptations that present themselves in dramatic fashion. We must also try to discover the small ways we are distracted and tempted. What is the attraction? How are we getting hooked?

It is difficult being in the wilderness, but it is good to know that we are led there by the Spirit. And the spirit will do us no harm. Jesus was seeking clarity about his life's mission during his time in the wilderness following his baptism. Soon after his wilderness experience He began to invite and attract people to a new way of life.

People are compelled by what is clear and resourceful. We can foster faithful living in others through our own wilderness experiences. In the wilderness we receive what only God can provide for us . . . strength and direction.

Some of the most powerful witnesses to the presence of God in life, come from wilderness experiences . . . the death of a spouse, the death of a child, the loss of a job, the failure of a marriage, the problem child, the accident that happened. In the wilderness, we receive what only God can provide for us . . . strength and direction!

Faithful living is more than assuming a role. It is a way that we understand and attempt to live our lives.

The 3 temptations that Satan uses with Jesus are redundant but very powerful. Each one builds upon the previous temptation and they are progressively harder to resist to those not grounded in prayer and vibrant community. They are revealed by Christ as follows:

- Level One Temptation: BREAD - Meeting the needs of the flesh. These are the temptations of immediate gratification and a life without turmoil or discomfort.
- Level Two Temptations: THE PINNACLE - The need to belong; for approval, acceptance, or popularity. For those not waylaid by a life ease, gratification, or comfort, Satan increases the stakes. He attempts to manipulate us through our confusion over the difference between unconditional dignity (what God offers) and performance-based approval (what Satan offers).
- Level Three Temptations: GLORY - Power, Control, and Authority. This is the “Big Leagues” of temptation. Those unable to resist comfort and acceptance can become very powerful. To those, Satan offers the easy way, where “the ends justify the means.”

But Jesus rejected all of these false forms of leadership. Instead, his leadership style is humility and influence. So here’s something to think about: Which form of leadership would you prefer?

- He/she controlled my life.
- He/she took power over my life.
- He/she had authority over my life.
- He/she influenced my life.

Jesus invites us to influence lives, not take them over. He shows us how to become influential in our communities not by assuming authority over others, but by becoming good news to the poor, by serving others.

After resisting Satan, our Lord’s purpose was not only clear, but so were his methods. Instead of self-comfort, approval, or manipulation, Jesus would choose humility, service, and influence. Jesus resisted temptation through a poverty of the heart and a desire to see God.

A poverty of the heart means this . . .

- a spiritual detachment from material things
- a considering of others' needs along side our own.
- a desire to see God from the perspective of humility
- making our true desire to live a life with God and in God.

Jesus showed us both the way to overcome temptation and the end result of overcoming temptation. Jesus showed us the reason He endured temptation and eventually death: to destroy evil for our sake. We may be tempted ourselves, but Jesus has been tempted as well. As He dealt with temptation, so can we with His help.

This is the reason we enter into the Forty Days of Lent. We enter the desert with Jesus, not only knowing we will be tested, but also assured Jesus has gone before us, He walks with us, and He has guaranteed the outcome. At the end of Lent comes the greatest gift . . . the gift of the Resurrection and the victory over evil!