

## SERMON “TIPS FOR TEMPTATION”

(Matthew 4:1-11 Preached at MPC on March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017)

Every year at this time, the Gospel lesson focuses on story of the temptation of Jesus.

This year the story is from Matthew—next year from Mark—the following year from Luke. It's the same story with minor variations. Jesus has just been baptized, and the Spirit leads him into the wilderness where he is tempted by the devil.

We follow a three-year cycle of readings called the lectionary, and not many stories are repeated year after year. For the most part, when we read a story, we won't see it again for three years. Why, then, should we hear this temptation story every year? A better question, I think, is why not hear it every day? That's how temptation comes to us, isn't it—every day—not just every three years. Is there anyone here who did not experience some kind of temptation yesterday? Is there anyone who does not expect some kind or form of temptation tomorrow?

Sometimes temptations are publicized as gross scandals—sexual encounters of the inappropriate kind—a roaring drunk—exposed embezzlement. Those are the temptations that we read about in the newspapers. Those are temptations that end people's careers— their marriages—and sometimes tragically, even their lives. Is there anyone here who has never been tempted by sex—or alcohol—or drugs—or money? Those are some of the big ones! Nearly everyone over the age of five bumps into one of those now and then.

But there are other, subtler, temptations too! The temptation to pad an expense account! To cut corners on our tax return especially this time of year! To snap at the wife! To ignore the kids! To get so wrapped up in work that we have no time or energy for anything else! To make promises we don't intend to keep! To tell a lie to get off the hook.

When we read the story of Jesus' temptation, we are tempted to think that his temptations were unlike ours. There was no sex. No booze. No drugs. But Jesus' temptations were very much like ours. For one thing, the devil attacked when Jesus was most vulnerable when Jesus had gone forty days without food. Then the devil attacked Jesus at the point of his vulnerability—he offered bread to slake Jesus' hunger.

Very few of us have ever been really hungry—I'm talking about bloated belly starving

hungry. We seldom miss a meal much less go a day without food. We haven't experienced the weakness that comes with real hunger—with starving hunger—the bloated bellies and side effects from slow starvation—there are plenty of people in this world who can identify with Jesus' hunger after his long fast, because they have been really starving hungry—desperate for food. But that's not our world. We don't know that kind of real hunger. And if we haven't been desperate for food, we have a desperation for something else—a desperation for love—for a kind word—for a bit of attention! Desperate for a real chance in life—for a foot on the ladder—for an education—for a decent job—for an opportunity to succeed.

For many us at an early age and perhaps even our own children, we all have a desperate need for a father's approval—as we get a little older we feel desperate for the attention of a certain boy or girl. If you have ever been desperate for anything at all—perhaps you can understand in some small way the desperation of a starving person for food. It was like that for Jesus when the devil tempted him to turn stones into bread. Jesus was desperately hungry, and the devil hit him at the point of his vulnerability.

The problem with that temptation—and the other two temptations as well—was to control the action that the devil was trying to get Jesus to do—it was more about who the devil was trying to put in charge. It would not have been so terrible for Jesus to turn stones into bread, but it would have been terrible for Jesus to let the devil set the agenda.

If Jesus had turned stones into bread at the devil's suggestion, what would the devil have suggested next? Who knows! The one thing that we can know for sure is that following the devil's lead puts us on a slippery slope. The devil says, put your foot here. No problem! Now put your foot there. No problem! Now put your foot...and whoops!

Some of you probably question whether there is such a thing as a devil. We have all seen pictures of the little red guy with horns—and a pointed tail—and a pitchfork. It isn't easy to believe in that sort of devil, is it? We should note, however, that the scriptures never tell us what the devil looks like. We tend to think that the whole idea of the devil is passé—that the problem of evil is simply sociological. We believe that, if we can just give people a decent place to live—and food to eat—and an education—and a real shot at life—the problem of evil will evaporate.

We can see the fallacy of that theory in the kids from good neighborhoods who do bad things. Kids from affluent homes often use drugs. Some take guns to school. And then there are some desperate people or terrorists who have more money than all of us put together, but use it to kill innocent people. Our theory that evil comes from bad economics—from bad neighborhoods—is only partially true. The fact is that evil also wells up inside our own hearts!

In the Bible, the devil is an evil force opposing God—opposing good—spreading evil. It might not be easy to believe in the little red guy with the pitchfork, but it's not at all difficult to believe that there is evil in our world. All we have to do is check out the daily news and we see all the evidence anyone could want.

The next thing that we need to realize is that the devil—the tempter—the evil force—is at work in a very personal way in our lives. Hardly a day goes by that we are not tempted to do something wrong. Sometimes the wrongs are small and sometimes they are big! Sometimes we succumb, and sometimes we prevail. But the tempter is always there—waiting—planning—looking for a weak moment. John 10:10 says, “The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy. Satan’s main purpose is to destroy us. We are in a spiritual battle and the business of temptation is exactly that—it’s personal and very dangerous.

Inclusive in the Tempter’s purpose to destroy us is to destroy our children. Our children are easy prey for the tempter. Too many children come home to empty houses—latch key kids with cable television and no supervision. Too many parents come home too exhausted to talk to their kids. We have thought that our kids needed freedom when, in fact, they needed someone to pay attention to them—someone who would establish limits. They need someone who takes time to know what their children are doing—and who cares enough to say No!

And then our kids leave home. They go off to a private or another state university. Colleges no longer do much to guide our young adults rightly. Nearly anything goes! CNN recently published a report stating that 23% of college women experience some form of unwanted sexual assault or contact while they were incapacitated because of alcohol and drugs! Parents you won’t find much moral teaching on most campuses today. No religious teachings, of course! No understanding of sex as relationship or commitment! No caring about broken hearts! The highest value regarding sex—is not to transmit disease. You need to get your children ready. That's the kind of world that

awaits them. Don't wait until they are teenagers. Give them a strong moral compass before they enter preschool.

Besides our own MPP, we have several other Christian pre-schools in our local community. A local mother explained on the news why she and her husband pay the extra tuition for a Christian pre-school. "It is because the Christian school helps her kids to develop their moral armor. It gets them ready for public high school. It gets them ready for college." I would also add, it gets them ready for the tempter!

Some people believe that it's wrong to protect children. They think that it will weaken them. It won't! Let me ask just one question. When you taught your young child to swim, did you toss him or her into the deep end first? I hope not! We need to start with a safe haven—a place where Christian values are taught and emphasized so we can develop our children's strength to handle a less protected environment.

Which leads me back to the story of Jesus. The devil tempted Jesus three times, and Jesus successfully rebuffed the devil three times. How did Jesus do it? What can we learn from this story to prepare and protect ourselves and our children from the tempter? Jesus used two weapons against the tempter—both are available to us. First, Jesus used the scriptures. Every time the devil tempted Jesus, Christ responded, "It is written"—He quoted scripture—the authority of the Word of God!

Jesus grew up in a Godly home, and he was educated in a synagogue. By the time that he was grown, he knew the Bible stories front to back. His parents and his rabbi prepared him well. When the devil tried to tempt him, Jesus used scripture alone to parry and block the temptations. It worked! He did not fall for even one temptation.

As Jesus was tempted for 40 days in the desert and used scripture to repel the Tempter's advances, one way to usher in the Lenten season as brother John mentioned earlier in the service is through an experiment—13 brave Christians at MPC stood together for 51 days to challenge each other to put God first—How? by implementing 5 spiritual disciplines daily to complete the John Wesley experiment. Praying and using scriptures is the foundation for this experiment.

These same scriptures are there for us too. They have great power. To harness that power, we need to know the scriptures. That takes some effort & study, but we can do it. We have Bible study groups here or find one elsewhere like BSF, Bible Study

Fellowship. Get involved in them. Make sure that your kids are in Sunday school. Keep a Bible by your chair at home. Read a story or a chapter every day. If you have small children, you are especially well positioned to study the scriptures. Get children's Bible storybooks from the Bible bookstore, and read a story or two every night to your children—It will strengthen them and you also!

Jesus used scriptures to defeat the devil. He also used one more weapon—the simple ability to say **No!** At the conclusion of the three temptations, Jesus said, "Away with you, Satan!" and the devil left. The devil didn't stay gone—but he went away for a while.

So, the second thing that we can do when tempted is to say, "Get behind me, Satan!" or remember the scene from the movie *Forest Gump* when the bad boys were attacking the young Forest on crutches—Jenny, Forest's young friend said, "Run Forest Run."

There's nothing to be gained by mud-wrestling with the devil. The devil is a world-class mud-wrestler. There's nothing to be gained by exposing ourselves to inappropriate and worldly behaviors that tempt us every day. Instead, we need to say, "Get behind me, Satan!" and then we need to turn our backs and run like *Forest Gump*! It isn't easy to walk away from temptation, but it gets easier each time we do it.

When the devil left, angels came and ministered to Jesus. That's the payoff. When we say "No!" to the tempter, God blesses us. The devil is not faithful, but God is. Use the most powerful weapon at our disposal as Jesus did—Use the Word of God and just say "No!" to the tempter, and see if God doesn't bless you! Amen and Amen!