

Tempted

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"Tempted" Pilgrim Church UCC Homily Outline, March 5, 2017, First Sunday in Lent (Matthew 4:1-11), The Temptations in the Wilderness

-First Temptation: the tempter goes for the jugular: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Remember Jesus just heard for the first time that he is God's Son at his Baptism and the Spirit leads him into the wilderness to be tempted—wants to put doubt in his mind.

-Jesus: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." [1] He knows his own worth. Our identity has nothing to do with how others perceive us—but it's tempting to believe that!

-Second Temptation: the tempter again says: "If you are the Son of God." Takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple and says to throw yourself down for it's written in scripture: "He will command his angels concerning you, and 'on their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

-Test of what kind of Messiah Jesus will be. Is he going to be like a super hero who can leap from buildings? Or is he going to be the Son of God who will suffer and die on a Roman cross?

-Jesus responds: "Again, it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" [2] Jesus doesn't teach/heal to make a spectacle. Jesus meets people where they are and works in those intimate, sacred places of our lives.

-Third Temptation: the tempter takes Jesus to a high mountain to unveil all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor: "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

-If Jesus ruled all the kingdoms, he would have ruled justly. He could have set things right, but where would his power have come from? Jesus passes his final test: "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship only the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" [3]

How are We Tempted?

-Just as we need not think of the Transfiguration as only an isolated incident atop Mount Tabor, we can expand our thinking about Jesus' Temptation in the Wilderness (even if we consider both metaphors.)

-Temptations are part of being human—"a desire to do something, especially something wrong or unwise"

-Tempted to have another piece of cheesecake (even if we may get a stomachache), buy more books (even if there's dozens of unread books at home), tell a little white lie (no one will ever know)

-But temptations are a slippery slope—we could end up seriously hurting ourselves and others.

-Buying another book isn't going to deeply hurt someone you love. Having an affair or stealing from your company or punching that person who insults you can end up hurting many.

-Bernie Madoff: Ponzi scheme was the largest financial fraud in U.S. history

-Giving into temptations we know are wrong or hurtful, bad for ourselves and for others—this has a ripple effect like a pebble in a pond. Lies lead to more lies. People may wonder by the end how did I get here?

-We're fooling ourselves if we think that we're somehow above temptations. Jesus' story of being tempted in the Wilderness is a story about his humanity and our humanity.

-Think of one of the most memorable stories in Genesis—there's the tempter! Telling Eve to eat that fruit: "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."^[4] Humans are tempted from the beginning! If someone says, you can eat all the cookies I just baked except for the brownies—don't you want those brownies more?!

-Temptations are part of being human. In some ways, the most important example Jesus gives today in the Wilderness is his resolve to worship and serve God alone. Gives us strength for our own temptations!

-We may be tempted to believe what others say about us, to doubt our self-worth or resolve, to doubt that God loves us. Even tempted to worship money, sex, food, alcohol, status, etc. But if we consistently turn and return to our loving, compassionate God—well, then we have a fighting chance to live our lives right.

[1] Matthew 4:3 and 4:4, NRSV.

[2] Matthew 4:6 and 4:7.

[3] Matthew 4:9 and 10.

[4] Genesis 3:4-5.