

Lent One

March 12, 2011

O God, be in my mouth as I speak for you and fill this place with your great grace...that we may leave this place less of what we used to be...and more of what we ought to be, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

After Jesus was baptized, he was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

Temptation is a word that has absented itself from much of our recent culture's vocabulary.

It is, after all, just so much easier to give into it.

A good friend several years ago gave me a Zelda Bulldog calendar with the following caption, "*lead me not into temptation, I can find it myself.*"

Even our prayer book is not immune from this issue. If you look at the modern version of the Lord's Prayer (it's the one we never ever say, because we all know that Episcopalians don't like change.)

It says "*save us from the time of trial*" instead of "*lead us not into temptation*".

In fact, everything in our modern world points to permission to enter into temptation immediately without hesitation.

Our culture even admires or celebrates those who enjoy succumbing to temptation.

Or at the least those folks seem to get their own reality shows. Who really needs another show about the Kardashians?

EB White, the author of *Charlotte's Web*, captured our contemporary conundrum this way, "*If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging that would be no problem. But I rise in the morning torn between a desire to improve or save the world and a desire to enjoy or savor the world....This makes it hard to plan the day.*"

Perhaps the best-known perspective on temptation was offered almost 1,300 years ago by St Augustine of Hippo.

In his popular autobiography, entitled *Confessions*, a young Augustine was stuck in his own wilderness struggling with sexual temptation. St. Augustine wrote that he used to pray to God, "*Lord make me chaste, just not yet*".

Let's face it, temptation is part of everyone's life. The struggle to overcome temptation toward evil or pleasure will always be an inescapable part of our earthly pilgrimage.

St. Paul offered these words of encouragement in I Corinthians 10:13, "*No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone, God is faithful and God will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing God will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.*"

Our readings this morning do provide a way for us to better understand our wilderness journeys, and to seek a way out from the perils of temptation.

In the Book of Genesis we witness how temptation toward evil led Adam and Eve to an act of faithlessness and sin.

In contrast, our Gospel from St. Matthew shows how Jesus Christ relied on faith in God's Word and authority to overcome evil.

Today's Scripture readings offer us two different paths we can follow in the season of Lent. Will we be faithful and obedient to God?

Or will we be faithful to the modern idol of temptation?

What kind of Christian are you going to be???

Now life for Adam and Eve would have been so easy if God had only planted one tree in the Garden of Eden.

Why do you suppose God planted two???

Why did God give Adam and Eve a choice between one over and against the other?

It was, I believe, God's way of testing them. God needed to see if they were able to be responsible tenants and trustees of God's vineyard.

The choice was simple. Adam and Eve had to choose between God's authority and their own, self-appointed authority.

What God offered to Adam and Eve is what Theologians today call "free will".

God loved his creation enough to give us the opportunity to choose freely between life and death.

Unfortunately, Adam and Eve chose poorly. They chose a self-centered life that ultimately leads to their deaths.

Furthermore, because Adam and Eve symbolize the way in which God has entrusted the earth to our care, we are expected to make wise decisions rooted in God's word.

The two trees can be seen as metaphors representing faithfulness versus faithlessness, conservation versus exploitation, saying "yes" to God versus saying "no" to God, affirming a life of relationship with God versus a life estranged from God.

This lesson also teaches us that evil and sin are primordial, which means that they have been with us since the beginning of time.

Carl Gustav Jung once wrote, "All the old primitive sins are not dead, but are crouching in the corners of our modern hearts."

For Christians today, the story of Adam and Eve symbolizes the belief that God's authority will always overrule any authority we choose to bestow upon ourselves.

So in these wilderness moments what do we do? During our Lenten journeys—and for the rest of our lives—how do we prepare to overcome any inclination toward sinfulness and selfishness?

How do we find our way out of the wilderness?

Jesus' experience in Mathew's Gospel helps to show us the key.

Our Lord demonstrates that there are three spiritual tools required for finding our way out of the wilderness.

These tools are simple: prayer, fasting, and faith in the power of God's word.

First of all Jesus prayed. We need to remember that whenever we enter into life's wilderness we need to be in conversation with God.

Prayer and meditative reflection—listening to God's voice—will always guide us through life's difficult moments.

How many of us are too busy for prayer? How many of us put off a few quiet moments each day being nourished by readings from Scripture or even finding time to read one of our Lenten devotion books? (They are available in Gable Hall after my sermon.)

Secondly our Lord fasted. Like a foundry worker purifying metal in the refining fire of the smelter, he purified himself---body, mind, and soul—of everything that obscured his connection to God.

In other words, Jesus recognized that the world puts lots of obstacles in our way when it comes to drawing closer to God.

Jesus shows us in his confrontation with Satan that he knew how to fast from the world's temptations and feast solely on God's Word.

Third Jesus relied on the power of Holy Scripture, God's word.

Standing firm on the promises of God, Jesus relied on the promise that his heavenly Father would save him, would deliver him from the time of trial, from the snare and pit of Satan's cunning allure.

When confronted by Satan, Jesus told him, "Man does not live by bread alone", "Do not put the Lord your God to the test", and "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him".

Prayer, Fasting and Holy Scripture, these are the same tools that Jesus offers us today, as we begin our own Lenten journeys.

This does not mean our journey won't be difficult, but I am confident that God has given us what we need to resist the temptations of this world

And furthermore to use this time of Lent to draw closer in relationship to a God who loves and forgives us despite the past mistakes we may have made.

Lent, my friends, is a time for new beginnings.

Immediately after Jesus came out of the wilderness, he began his ministry to our world. Whenever we emerge from our wilderness experiences, we are called to do the same.

May we use the tools God provides this Lent, Prayer, Fasting and Scripture, to help us place our trust in God alone and reject the temptation that we have to worship ourselves.

Have a blessed Lenten Journey.

Amen