



“What is Most Tempting”

Pastor Andy CastroLang

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Scripture (NRSV):

Matthew 4:1-11

The Temptation of Jesus

⁴ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³ The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴ But he answered, “It is written,

‘One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

‘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.’”

⁷ Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹ and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’”

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Sermon:

Have you noticed the cover of your bulletin? Kinda dramatic, a little spooky? A young man, pale of face, with dark hair and eyes...with a very creepy older man, hooded, in black...leaning threateningly over him. His hand on the young man's shoulder looks almost like a claw. Dark clouds, black crows in the air...the whole picture speaks of drama. Well, it's supposed to be Jesus, battling temptation with Satan. It could be Harry Potter with the malevolent Voldemort, or Luke Skywalker with the evil Emperor Palpatine!

It might be more exciting if it were. But amazingly, and certainly not in Hollywood style, I am aware that most temptations are not flashy, not a great story even. Most of my temptations seem very real, but icky and unglamorous. How about you? Most of my temptations, and yours, too, I bet...are not about world domination (the third temptation) or defying death (the second temptation) or even about satisfying all your human hungers (the first temptation).

It may well be that we do not even clearly see the temptations set before us, sometimes. After all, many of us believe that our care of our children, which can be control of our children, which can be the manipulation of their love, through guilt or shame...this is not sin, it's care.

But when love of another becomes domination or control, or the pressure to conform to your wishes, then it is indeed a sin...not world domination but domination, still. And it is wrong. As we know it is wrong, but slide into it anyway.

It is in the nature of temptation to be "easier"...to take just a little bite of the forbidden fruit, to take the "less stressful", "more comfortable" way through an issue, a relationship, a problem.

I am pretty clear within myself, that one great temptation I face, over and over, is the sin of expecting someone else to do the hard thing. If standing against oppression might mean I have to get up early on Saturday and march...I kinda hope I can stay in bed.

If protecting the environment or our schools means I have to share my money or write letters to congress...I kinda hope somebody else with more money is doing it, and somebody else is writing the postcards to our Representative Cathy McMorris-Rogers or Senators Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell, or Speaker Paul Ryan.

Here is a quick question: how many of us complain about the potholes in our city? All of us, of course! How many of us take pictures and make the phone calls to the city's "pothole hotline" to tell them where the potholes are? I am waiting for somebody else to do it. Now this is no big-time, flashy sin, nothing like world domination. I know that.

The bulletin cover for my sins would probably be very boring! It would be me with books, a garden, and a bed, all my great temptations. Just taking care of me, walks with the grandbabies, no big deal. Not hurting anybody. What's a sin in that?

This is the thing: there are great big awful sins in the world; we know them, they make the history books, and they are all over social media, in the news and movies.

And then, there are the other sins which tempt so many of us.

- Jesus went straight from his baptism, out into the desert fasting and praying.

I would have had a big party and given myself six months to get used to the idea of a fast. I would have decided I didn't need to go anywhere. A Sunday prayer would suffice.

- Jesus faced the pain of hunger and realized his life was more than his appetites.

I would have gone out to dinner. Gone shopping. Ignored others' needs, fed my own desires. Read another book.

- Jesus faced his fears for his own life, faced his own desire to live a quiet life, to be safe, to stay alive at any cost...

I would have hidden from fear, denied danger or death any place in my life. Gone to a movie with a happy ending. Bought a home in a gated community. Gone to the gym, gone to the doctor...checked and double-checked my cholesterol levels!

- Jesus faced the terrific temptation to take over and finally do it right. Get it done!

The face of sin promises that we can do it better, if we just take charge of others' lives; if we are in control. I might very well have said, "Here, just let me do it."

Friends, sin is not usually glamorous, or hideous. It is so often ordinary and sneaky and we have to talk back to it, time and again.

Just as Jesus did.

We have to remind ourselves, again and again, of what is really going on.

Turn our sinful selves back towards the tug of God on our lives.

God's tug..which is not easy or comfortable, because we have God's tug through the law and the prophets, through the psalms...these are the words Jesus speaks during his temptations...the teaching of, the words of, the tug of, God.

You might not quote Scripture like Jesus, but you know this: “Love the Lord with all your heart, all your soul and all your might; and love your neighbor as yourself”. Deuteronomy 6, Luke 10

You know this: “when did I see you Lord...when I was hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, in prison...” Matthew 25

You may know this: “what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” Micah 6

It is Lent, I invite you to practice looking at your temptations and talking back to them. Use scripture, study scripture, find encouragement in talking back to your temptations through the reading of the psalms, or the stories of Jesus in the gospels.

Maybe you will join me in conversation about The Book of Joy.

Maybe you will find other ways to do good, and be good.

Our sins cling to us.

We must talk back to them. Tell them that God is at the heart of our lives, not them.

And when we do, we will receive the gift of rest from our work of resistance.

Our text today says that angels came to Jesus. Look around carefully, and I believe that you, too, will find angels; God’s loving messengers, around you as you face the temptations of this life. Friendship and comfort, courage and determination come with them.

We are never alone. Do not despair of being good, or of doing good. Jesus is our teacher, we will follow him.

Amen.