

"The Temptation of Ourselves"

Matthew 4:1-11

Here we are at the beginning of lent. A season where we examine some of the darker parts of our faith and darker parts of our faith experiences. The tone of Lent tends to be more somber than at other times of the year. Yet this does not mean we should not embrace Lent. In fact as we go through cycles of life we go through times of lent within our own lives. The somber darkness of this season is something very real for us as humans.

Yet in this somberness, I don't want us to feel that we are in a season of despair. In fact at the end of the season we have the greatest event of history occur, which is the resurrection of Christ. So while we focus on the harder parts of life, don't despair. We have hope in Christ. We have a hope that will come to us for God loves us so much that through the darkness there is light that we can experience.

Today though we wrestle with the darkness of lent. We begin with the theme of temptation. Temptation is something that we all experience in our lives. Whether we want to admit it or not we will face temptation. We will face things like whether or not we should have that little piece of chocolate, or we will face temptation to cheat on things like taxes, or things more serious. Temptation is everywhere.

Temptation is something that has been with us from the beginning of time. In our Genesis reading we have Adam and Eve in the garden. They were tempted by the serpent to partake of the fruit of the forbidden tree. In this tree they learned of the knowledge of good and evil. God commanded that they should not eat of this tree. Instead, they felt the temptation to partake in something God had forbidden. They broke the commandment of God and then they suffered the

consequences of being cast out of the garden and they would then experience hardship for the rest of their lives.

When I think about my own life, I know there are times when I have been tempted and I have simply fall into the temptation. Of course, when I was a child there always the temptations of taking the cookies that weren't mine or going to down the street when I was only suppose to go a shorter distance.

When I got into high school the temptations changed. I would be tempted to skip class or go somewhere my parents told me not to go. As hard as it is for you all to imagine, I was not a perfect child. I sure wasn't a perfect child in college. Still not perfect in seminary. But the thing I have now is that I know that when I face temptation in whatever form it may appear, I know that I am not alone in struggling with this temptation.

In fact none of us are alone in our struggles with temptation. We know that we will be tempted to break the ways of those close to us or break the ways of God. Yet we don't have to fall into this. We have Christ on our side. We can lift up our temptations to Christ and seek out a new way that will guide us through the temptation. We know we can do this, because Christ himself faced temptation while he was on this earth.

In our text from Matthew we have the story of where Christ was tempted in the wilderness. This came after his baptism by John the Baptist. Christ felt moved by the Holy Spirit that he should spend time in the wilderness, where he could be tempted by the devil. The tempter came to Christ and tempted him three times. The first temptation was with food, the next temptation was testing God, and the last temptation was power. Christ overcame these temptations by relying on his knowledge of scriptures and God and prevailed over the tempter in the wilderness.

So we know that Christ knows what temptation is and he knows the struggle that we get into as Christians when we face temptation. The Son of God knows our struggles so there is no need to despair in all reality. It's a great comfort that we can rely on and focus our energies towards when we are faced with difficult decisions. Yet even though Christ knows our struggle, we will still face temptation and tough decisions while we are still on this earth.

I find that in the scriptures there is a strategy that we can look toward when facing temptation. Christ relied on three things in his struggle with temptation. These three things are that he understood his identity, knew his purpose, and followed God's will. These are three things that we can rely on when facing temptation in our own lives.

Three times in the Matthew passage we see that the devil questioned Christ on his identity. The devil would say "if you are the Son of God, then do this." The devil knew the identity of Christ and tried to use it against him. This would have been a real temptation because the devil was acknowledging the nature of Christ and stating that indeed Christ could do nearly anything that he wanted to do. However, Christ was also aware of his identity and used this against the devil.

Christ knew that his identity was that of the Son. He was not the father. While we believe that the father and the Son are of one substance we know that the Son is subordinate to the Father. Christ had great powers at his disposal yet he did not fall into the trap of using his powers for his own gain. Christ knew that as the Son all of his actions were to glorify that Father; his actions were not to glorify himself or bail himself out of hard situations. Christ knew that he needed to maintain his humility when facing these temptation of identity.

We can use this strategy when we face temptation in our lives. We know that as Christians we are a set apart people, but we do not need to do things that will glorify ourselves.

Instead we should seek out ways that glorify the father, much as Christ followed. We are not out to make ourselves look good towards the world. We are to be subordinate to the Father and make sure that all of our actions are ultimately for the glory of God. If we hold onto this idea, then we have our first strategy for facing temptation.

The second strategy that Christ had when facing temptation was that of knowing his purpose. The purpose of Christ again is again to glorify the Father, but also the purpose of Christ is to be an example for us in our lives. In the second temptation Christ was told by the devil that if he casted himself down from the temple then indeed the angels of God would come and save him from certain death from the fall. Yet Christ did not fall into this trap, because he knew that he needed to be an example for us.

Christ's response to this was to quote scripture, that a person was not to put God to the test. How often have we when faced a decision have tried to put God to the test? It's a temptation that we face more often than we may think. Sometimes we may take a risk that would put God to the test. I am equally guilty with this, as there have been times I have made decisions that probably weren't the smartest. But again we do not have to despair when faced with these situations. We have Christ to rely upon and to guide us through the temptation. Christ knows how hard the temptation is because he has been there himself.

The third strategy that Christ employed in fighting temptation is that he reminded himself of God's will rather than of his own desires. At the last temptation in the wilderness the devil offered Christ the chance to rule the world because he had the power to make the nations serve him alone. The devil said that the nations would be Christ's if he began to worship him. Yet again Christ fires back with more scripture and knowledge.

Christ told the devil that God was to be worshipped alone, not the devil or any other person or entity on this earth. God is the focus of our lives alone. Not powers, things, or people, but God alone. We are to put God's will first and not our own will.

We can use this strategy to fight temptation in our lives as well. We pray every Sunday in the Lord's prayer that we pray for God's will. When we are faced with temptation it should be our prayer to seek God's will in the situation. Through earnest prayer and study I believe that we can make just decisions before God. Surrendering ourselves to God is a key component as believers, and Christ lived into this example.

So those are the three strategies that I have seen Christ employ in fighting temptation. They are three strategies that other people have seen as well in the studies of the scripture. There is a common theme to all of this however. The common theme is the renunciation of evil.

Christ throughout his ministry encouraged his followers to reject evil at every opportunity that they could. This is at the core of facing temptation. We are to reject the evil that we see and focus on God alone. We'll continue to face this throughout our whole lives, but we can make it through these trials in our lives.

Christ was able to ward off the strongest tempter of all, the devil. We can see that in the stories passed down to us generation after generation. We have the ultimate example of life guiding us through the hardship. Christ remembered his identity, purpose, and God's will in his struggles. We can take that example into our lives and fully renounce the ways of evil.

Today is the start of a journey. We'll continue to examine the themes of lent and the stories of the season. In all of this we will discuss hardship and things that are not so pleasant. But remember that darkness and death are not the end story. We must continually look forward

with hope for a better tomorrow. We must push forward in life. We must keep Christ on our mind as we go about our lives. We can do this, we can see the light at the end of darkness.

Today as we celebrate communion, I encourage you to think of the ways that you can face of temptation and evil in your own lives. Remember that through the presence of Christ we are restored and can live with the full armor of God in our lives. In this act of communion we are showing the world what is truly important and that is the life that we can find in Christ. We have the great advocate of Christ on our side throughout our life. Take heart in this and remember the journey that Christ went on so that we may have an eternal and redeemed life in God. Amen.