

“Confronting Temptation”
Matthew 4:1-11
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There are many words we use in the church that just don't communicate outside the church, words like atonement, apocalyptic and sanctification. Even the very technical Baptist term “RA Car Race” needs interpretation for outsiders. But the word “temptation” is not one of these words. It is a word everyone understands, a word that is used everywhere in our culture, a word that applies to every aspect of life.

We speak of being tempted to have dessert, to say something we ought not, to do something we ought not. There are popular songs that deal with temptation, films that explore the subject and many real-life stories about people who have given in to temptation. Temptation confronts all of us and it creeps into every aspect of life. So, it seems appropriate that Lent begins with the story of Jesus' temptations. Perhaps there is something we can learn from his experience.

The setting gives the informed reader a clue as to the nature of Jesus' challenges. In Hebrew scripture, “the wilderness” is a place of preparation and assessment. Prayer and fasting are usually involved. So, as Jesus goes into the wilderness, having fasted prayerfully for forty days and nights, the stage is set for him to be prepared and assessed.

Then, Matthew makes it clear that Jesus' experience is intentional. He doesn't wander into the wilderness by accident. The Spirit leads him there right after baptism. He is supposed to be there, he is supposed to be tempted or tested as the Greek word can be translated. So, this really does feel like a time of preparation and assessment.

Finally, each temptation concerns a core value of Jesus' ministry – whether he will focus on bread alone, just physical needs; whether he will resort to parlor tricks to get a crowd, throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple and assume God will send angels to catch him; whether he will be willing to do whatever it takes to obtain power.

Each challenge Jesus faces is real in this moment, but also representative of challenges he will face throughout his journey. As someone has said, what happens in the wilderness does not stay in the wilderness! These are challenges to his very identity, temptations to be someone other than who he is, tests of his faithfulness to God.

And each temptation looks good on the surface. To be able to feed hungry people is a good thing. Gathering a crowd could help him spread his message. Having influence over the world could enable him to effect change. The problem lies with the cost of each proposal – living by bread alone and not addressing spiritual needs, putting God to a test, shifting allegiance away from God – not remaining true to who he is.

In the end, Jesus does not yield to temptation, he passes the test, he remains true to his calling. And this is part of the benefit of reflecting on his experience. We would like to confront our temptations faithfully. But it also helps us to see the whole process for what it is.

If we are to learn from Jesus' experience, in whatever way we are tempted, we have an opportunity to reveal our identity and further develop our character. The Spirit doesn't lead us into every temptation we face, but once we are there, the Spirit is with us. And every temptation is a kind of test of our character.

So, how might these insights inform the way we confront temptation, first in our personal lives? Sometimes we are tempted at our weakest points, whether that means an excess of food or drink, a compulsion to gamble, an inappropriate relationship or buying things we don't need. We all have a weakness, a point at which we are tempted.

Yet, much temptation comes not at the point of our weakness, but at the point of our strength. Pride does go before the fall. Confidence is a good thing, but the basketball team that doesn't think it can lose will. The charismatic leader who thinks he/she is invincible is destined for a rude awakening. Each of us has areas of life where we think all is well, and all may be well, but a little humility goes a long way.

I have told some of you about my college roommate's grandfather who was a Nazarene pastor. Granddaddy was in a Big Band as a young man and lived a wild life until his conversion, after which he lived on

the straight and narrow. He gave up many things, including movies. So, he never went to a movie, even a Disney movie, the rest of his life!

Granddaddy was not vulnerable to a number of temptations others are, but he insisted that he struggled with temptation. “The Devil knows he can’t tempt me to do certain things,” he would say, “but he can tempt me not to love as I ought.” We are all tempted, just in different ways.

But whether we are tempted at our weakest point or our strongest, the challenge is not just to avoid a wrong or do a right, but to define and develop our character. We think we know who we are, but we find out who we are in the heat of a challenge. We like to think we are honest, but when we fill out our tax forms, do we disclose everything? We like to think we are people of integrity, but given a chance to cut a corner rather than doing something right, what do we do? We like to think we love our neighbor, but when our neighbor has a need, what do we do?

Every time we face one of these challenges, we need to recognize it for what it is, a kind of test or temptation that concerns more than a specific choice or action, an opportunity to reveal and further define the kind of people we are. It’s not that one bad choice ruins a life. We all make mistakes, but over time our choices define our character.

But we not only confront temptations in our personal lives, we confront them as a church, and as we do, we need to recognize them for what they are, a kind of test, an opportunity to reveal who we are. One temptation for any historic church is to get stuck in the past, to become too nostalgic about our history, and thus fail to embrace the challenges of the present and the possibilities of the future.

Our heritage is a blessing, a rich resource to guide us. This sanctuary and the people who have worshipped here and in other settings for 205 years as of this Wednesday, serve as ballast for all we face. The key is to make sure ballast doesn’t become plough mud, to stick with a maritime metaphor. Traditions are wonderful as long as they provide meaning to each new generation. When they fail to do so, holding on to them can get in the way of new things that faithfully build on the past.

But this is not the only temptation we face as a church. Another challenge all churches face in this time is the temptation to act out of

fear. The percentage of Americans attending church on a given Sunday has been declining for decades. In 1990 that percentage was 20.7, in 2009 it had fallen to 17, and it has fallen further to this day. Now, the percentage of Americans who say they are in church is double that number, which takes us back to the honesty question, but the reality is sobering. After years of looking down our noses at the European church, we are now following in its path. Pride does go before the fall.

The temptation is not to be concerned about this phenomenon, but to act out of fear in response to it. Concern is appropriate, action is needed, but acting out of fear rarely leads to anything good. What the church needs is a thoughtful, prayerful response to current realities. Using our heritage as ballast, we should act out of our strengths, be the part of the larger body of Christ we are called to be, trusting that others will be theirs. But we must adapt, try new things, though some will fail.

I shared with the deacons last year an article about a new venture a church in a college town tried. Some members thought the church should start a midweek worship service for students. A former youth and college ministry consultant in the church agreed to lead the effort. There was much enthusiasm. Those involved sensed the Spirit's leadership and thus developed a wonderful service. The only problem was no college students came, the first week or any other week.

It was a failure, right? No. Other people came, people the planners had not considered, including some musicians recruited to lead the service who had not been connected to a faith community. You never know where a new venture might lead. It just needs to be shaped not out of fear, but out of a sense of purpose and love.

So, the church is tempted to get stuck in the past and act of fear, and we are tempted to measure our faithfulness by cultural standards. Paying attention to how many people are affected by any ministry is important, but numbers alone don't tell us what we need to know. Our calling is to stir spiritual growth, not just numerical growth. We can measure how many people are in a room, but we cannot measure why, we cannot measure love, we cannot measure transformation.

When Mother Teresa was asked how she kept doing what she did, given the fact that no matter how many poor people she helped, there

were always more poor people, she replied, “I was never called to be successful. I was only called to be faithful.” Such is the calling of every Christian and every church. Faithfulness is our charge. And as is the case with personal temptation, we need to recognize what is at stake in all the temptations we face as a church, not just a specific action to take or avoid, but the very nature of who we are, our character and identity.

I have heard a story about the time when this church became integrated again in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. When a man of African descent proposed to join the church, someone said to the pastor at the time, John Lewis, “That man’s just trying to test us.” Dr. Lewis replied, “If he is, I hope we pass the test.” Indeed! And don’t we hope we pass all the tests that come our way as a church?

So, we are tempted as individuals and as a church, and we are tempted as a nation. I don’t have enough time to get into much trouble here, but we do live in a time of much temptation, one of which is to assume that we are invulnerable. Every civilization has had a beginning and an end. There is no guarantee that our principles of democracy will always be valued. They must be defended in each new generation.

Another temptation we face is to see ourselves as God’s only instrument of grace and healing. According to orthodox theology, God tried accomplishing salvation through a nation, and when that didn’t work, God chose to act through a Son. No one nation is the vehicle of grace. God has many ways of working through many people. We proclaim Christ crucified, not any nation or land. This doesn’t mean we don’t have much for which to be grateful. We just need to be careful not to let our love of country become a kind of idolatry.

One last temptation we face as a nation is the temptation to allow our differences to divide us. Our diversity has always been our strength. Our unity comes through shared values and aspirations, not identical beliefs and backgrounds. In recent years, our differences have started to divide us. This is a test of our character. We need to recognize what is at stake and fight for our heritage. And in all things, we need to heed the counsel of President Abraham Lincoln and not assume that God is on our side, but pray and worry earnestly whether we are on God’s side.

Defining our character as individuals, passing the test as a church, praying that we are on God's side as a nation – these are the things that are at stake when we confront temptation; or to put it another way - simply remembering who we really are. May God grant us the wisdom to recognize what is at stake and the courage to respond faithfully!