

Cornel Barnett
Redwoods Presbyterian Church
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Mark 1:9-15
“Lent 1: Temptation”

Humorist and playwright Oscar Wilde wrote: “The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it.” He also wrote: “I can resist everything but temptation.”

More seriously, William Penn wrote: “For as men in battle are continually in the way of being shot, so we, in this world, are ever within the reach of Temptation.”

The opening hymn today signifies we have begun the forty-day season of Lent. The forty days are modeled on the number of days Jesus spends in the wilderness.

Clay just read: “And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.”

Mark’s paucity of detail leaves everything to our imagination. Regarding temptation the story says simply that Jesus was tempted by Satan. We are not told how he was tempted and how he overcame the temptations but he did and went on to proclaim that, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

I’ve chosen “temptation” as our first Lenten reflection in a series of sermons I’ll preach during Lent.

Dictionaries define temptation as something that seduces or has the quality to seduce; desire to have or do something that you know you should avoid; the act of influencing by exciting hope or desire; the fact or state of being tempted, especially to evil. One is tempted to do something that one knows is wrong.

One of the most famous modern stories of temptation was shown in the PBS special on President Bill Clinton early this week. It has a sequence of the United States federal government shutdown of 1995 and 1996 as the result of conflicts between Democratic President Bill Clinton and the Republican Party-controlled Congress over funding for Medicare, education, the environment, and public health in the 1996 federal budget.

The government shut down after Clinton vetoed the spending bill the Congress sent him. The federal government put non-essential government workers on furlough and suspended non-essential services for 28 days. The major players were President Clinton and Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Newt Gingrich.

We see a troubled President wandering alone and waiting it out with staff in the White House. Among the staff is a young intern Monica Lewinsky who tells the president that she has an enormous crush on him. Under normal circumstances the intern would be out of there but Clinton, feeling down and giving into his attraction for women, succumbs to the biggest temptation and blunder of his career and has an affair with Lewinsky and later lies about it. He's eventually impeached for lying under oath.

The forces of evil – that infect Lewinsky and Clinton – exploit our lowest, most struggling moments, our wilderness places, and wants to destroy us. It's at times like this that we need the strong, spiritual energy of Jesus to sustain, support and guide us.

The only detail given in the story by Mark is that Jesus is tempted by Satan. This narrows temptation considerably. I'm not sure if Satan cares whether we eat an extra scoop of ice cream or if we buy an extra blouse or shirt unless these are destructive to our personalities or relationships.

In John's gospel Jesus refers to Satan as "the thief." He says, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."
(10:10)

Satan is a destructive force. It was said way before the economic collapse of 2008 that "the devil wears a pin-stripe suit and works on Wall Street."

A Bizarro cartoon in Thursday's San Francisco Chronicle was perfectly timed for this sermon. It has an operating surgeon in scrubs announcing to Satan who is sitting in the waiting room: "I'm afraid I have some good news."

Bottom-line: Satan wants bad news not good news. The surgery failed. That's good news for Satan. That's why the surgeon is afraid. Satan hates real good news. And that's why he makes a beeline for Jesus at the beginning of his ministry in the wilderness.

He must have heard the voice from heaven telling Jesus that "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" and wasted no time to entrap Jesus like he did Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Isn't it amazing that the words spoken from heaven here are the exact words spoken by the voice – God's voice – from the clouds on the Mountain of Transfiguration, the subject of last Sunday's sermon.

It refers to Jesus' spiritual identity as a beloved son of God. The sermon last week affirmed that as Christians – Christ ones – we also have this identity. We too are beloved daughters and sons of God which makes us strong candidates for the wiles of the devil.

The beautiful thing about our faith is that that it represents the good, the just, the peaceful and the compassionate and that is bad news for the force of evil personified in the nomenclature Satan.

Some of us have taken on special commitments this Lent and be assured that we will be tempted to forego them. Satan makes a beeline to us when we want to be more faithfully God's people.

But be assured writes Paul to the church in Corinth: "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the tempting God will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it." (1 Corinthians 10:13)

Oxford professor and Christian, C. S. Lewis, wrote to a correspondent about dealing with temptation:

"Of course I have had and still have plenty of temptations. Frequent and regular prayer, and frequent and regular Communion (worship services), are a great help, whether they *feel* at the time as if they were doing you good or whether they don't. I also found great help in monthly confession to a wise old clergyman.

"Perhaps, however, the most important thing is to *keep on*: not to be discouraged however often one yields to the temptation, but always to pick yourself up again and ask forgiveness.

"In reviewing your sins don't either exaggerate them or minimize them. Call them by their ordinary names and try to see them as you would see the same faults in somebody else - no special blackening or whitewashing.

"Remember the condition on which we are promised forgiveness: we shall always be forgiven provided that we forgive all who sin against us. If we do that we have nothing to fear: if we don't, all else will be in vain.

"Of course there are other helps which are mere commonsense. We must learn by experience to avoid either trains of thought or social situations which *for us* (not necessarily for everyone) lead to temptations. Like motoring -- don't wait till the last moment before you put on the brakes but put them on, gently and quietly, while the danger is still a good way off." (*Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, Volume III, pp. 1285-1286)

Jesus tells his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane to "Stay awake and pray that you may not come into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Matthew 26:41)

It's tough being a Christian but the world depends on it. It would be easy to be like Oscar Wilde and simply yield to temptation. In many ways Wilde was a tragic figure because of it.

Mark doesn't tell us how Jesus resisted the wiles of the devil but we know he did and he continued to throughout the gospels. As followers of Jesus we can learn from him and do likewise. Amen.