

First Sunday in Lent
February 18, 2018

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1 Peter 2:9-10
Mark 1:9-13

The Real Temptation

*He was in the wilderness forty days,
tempted by Satan; and He was with the
wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*
– Mark 1:13



Ilya Repin – Temptation of Christ in the Wilderness

“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” We pray those words, some pray them every day, but DOES God actually lead us into temptation? Pope Francis says, “No, God does not lead anyone toward sin.” The Pontiff recently suggested a change in the Catholic liturgy from, “Lead us not into temptation,” to “Do not let us fall into temptation.”ⁱ I think the Holy Father is right, *that is* a better translation but ... wow...changing the way English speakers say the Lord’s Prayer ... that will be a tough row to hoe.

Thankfully, God knows what we need before we ask.ⁱⁱ And right now we need help. We need help untangling the mess in this country. We need help with the massive level of violence and corruption plaguing us. We need help in building charity, civility, and community. Amen?

On the first Sunday in Lent, we join churches around the world in remembering Jesus’ temptation – and considering our own temptations. As always, we start with Jesus. His recorded temptation happened just after His baptism when He heard the voice from heaven naming Him as God’s beloved son. Then immediately the Spirit drove Him, the Greek is very strong here. The Spirit forced Him, drove Him out, into the wilderness where He was tempted – not by God, but by Satan. Listen to Mark, chapter 1, verses 9-13:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as He was coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on Him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

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.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Oscar Wilde famously said, "I can resist everything -- except temptation!"

Once there was a young boy who wanted a new pair of sneaker skates. His parents, hoping to teach him the value of money, said he would have to save part of the cost from his allowance. His mother overheard him in his room one afternoon shaking his bank and counting his money. Then she heard the music from the ice cream truck coming down the street. She waited to see what would happen. He wanted those skates, she knew, but he also liked ice cream. There was no sound at all from the room until the truck had passed, and the music had faded. Then she heard her son pray, "Thank you, Jesus! But please don't let that ice cream truck come down my street again."

We need help, don't we? St. Paul put it this way, "The very thing I will I cannot do, but, in fact I do the very thing I hate."ⁱⁱⁱ We know all about temptation.

Satan tempts Jesus, not with ice cream but – according to the other gospels – with good: bread to feed the hungry, and glory, celebrity, a platform for his message. Mark doesn't go into all that detail. Mark only says that Jesus' battle with Satan lasted "40 days." In Biblical language that means a seriously long time.

God didn't tempt Jesus. Satan did. Sometimes it's hard for sophisticated, educated moderns to swallow the whole notion of a personal devil. Satan and devils and demons seem ridiculous, more like cartoon characters than real entities, that is, until we see their work on the news, as we did this past week. Fred Craddock uncomfortably noted that, "not believing in demons has hardly eradicated evil in our world."^{iv}

Out in the wilderness Jesus fought against Satan. Martin Luther called Satan, "the prince of darkness grim." That's poetic but not exactly accurate. In the Bible every time Satan shows up, it is not as the personification of evil, but as the Tempter, the one who tests the metal of God's beloved sons and daughters.

At Jesus' baptism the voice from heaven declared,

"You are my Son, the Beloved."

It's no coincidence that the Tempter shows up immediately after Jesus' baptism, when the sky was torn open and the Spirit descended on him and the voice from heaven announced who he truly was, and is, and always will be. God said:

You are my beloved Son. You are the heir to my identity, my only plan for the salvation of the world. You are my prophet, my priest, my anointed one. You are my suffering servant. You are the Giver, my perfect model for humanity. You are the one I am sending down the long and painful road to Jerusalem. You are the one who will descend to the depths of agony, and rise in triumph for the salvation of the world.

"You are my beloved son, and I am well pleased with you."

Jesus' vocation and His identity as the Son of God could not have been clearer. Then immediately, the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness where He was surrounded by wild beasts AND angels, and the devil tried to dissuade Him from His path. Tried and failed.

I love what Michael Lindvall said. Michael is the pastor of the Brink Presbyterian Church in New York City. I'm paraphrasing a much longer piece Michael wrote. He said:

The intimate juxtaposition between identity and temptation is all you need to know. Satan didn't tempt Jesus with Cuban cigars or single malt Scotch...The Adversary tempted him to forget his identity.^v

It is the same for you and me.

When you take the name Christian, at Baptism or Confirmation, or when you join the church, you answer the question, "Who is your Lord and Savior?" When you do, you are taking his identity. You are declaring to all who will hear that you belong to Jesus Christ.

There's no way to be equivocal on this: You can't be a little bit Christian. With Jesus it's all or nothing. To be a Christian isn't one identity among many, it is our whole identity. To be a Christian isn't one loyalty among many, it is our whole loyalty. Our faith is not just one personal interest among several others. Church is not just another one of the groups where we belong. Jesus lays claim to everything we are.

Of course, you are also a mother or a chemistry teacher. You may be a Christian investment banker. Maybe you're a follower of Jesus Christ who is also a lawyer. But your faith guides your chemistry teaching and your mothering and your lawyering and not the other way around.^{vi}

This isn't how the world sees it, of course. You go to a party – I hope you go to lots of parties – when you meet someone for the first time, they usually ask, "What do you do?" It's a reasonable question. The person asking wants to know who you are. Nobody answers the question by saying, "I follow Jesus Christ," although that is exactly what you do. It is the main thing you do, or more to the point, it's who you are.

I say I'm a pastor, You say "I'm a physician," or "I'm a sophomore at UVA," as if you are your income, or you are your school; when you know for certain that is not who you are.^{vii} See the disconnect?

Sadly, I think this is part of what happened in Florida this week. I don't know a lot about the circumstances, but from the news reports, it appears that a young man with mental illness and ridiculously easy access to automatic weapons, came completely apart following the death of his mother.^{viii} I'm not making any excuses for what he did. What he did was evil, pure and simple.

When things like this happen – and they happen with unacceptable frequency -- I want to scream, "Where was this family's church?" Where was the comfort and restoration they have in Jesus Christ? Where was the youth ministry that should have wrapped its arms around this kid and helped him through his loss? I don't know anything about the shooter's family or his faith.

It seems to me that somewhere along the way he forgot his identity, he lost sight of the truth -- that he is a beloved child of God – if, in fact, he ever knew.

Anger is an incredibly powerful tool that the Tempter uses.

A friend sent me a video this week. It was a short clip from an interview with Sebastian Junger, the author of *Tribes*. Junger highlights something that you may have also noticed about these mass shootings. They don't happen in high crime areas – ever. Do you find that surprising? They occur exclusively in middle class and affluent communities -- otherwise safe settings, never in the inner city. Why is that? Junger said, “I have done a lot of research into it... and I am convinced that this violence, this depression and suicide is a result of the catastrophic lack of communal connection.”^{ix}

This kid and others like him were/are isolated.

While the politicians shout at each other about whether this horror – which has to stop – whether these mass shootings are caused by the profusion of guns, or by mental illness, we are all missing one very important aspect of this epidemic. In America we have forgotten who we are. We have forgotten that we are a community, *e pluribus unum*, out of many, one. We belong to each other.

“The intimate juxtaposition between identity and temptation is all you need to know.” (again Junger)

Our core identity is the imitation of Christ. During South Africa's epic struggle against Apartheid, one of the most respected voices for change was Desmond Tutu. Some of his closest colleagues were sometimes distressed by his moderation and tolerance toward those who disagreed. They wished he would be more aggressive toward his opponents. One of them said, “At his age you would think he would have learned to hate a little more. But there is a problem with Tutu: he believes literally in the gospel.” What he was saying is that Desmond Tutu knows who he is. He remembers his baptism. He is committed to his people, and he will not change the script.^x

Teachers and students have been on everybody's mind. I have so much respect for all of you. I remember a marvelous woman, one of my high school English teachers. Mrs. Wood was faculty advisor for our high school newspaper, and I was the editor; a role I loved when it meant making reporting assignments and deciding on layout and ads. When it came time to writing the weekly editorial, it was a role I hated.

It wasn't that I had nothing to say; our school and community were popping with issues, but I was a Southern girl. In the South, the most important thing one can be is polite. I was terrified that something I'd write would offend one of my classmates, or a faculty member. I didn't want anyone upset. Consequently, the stuff I wrote was milk toast, bland, and not at all compelling.

One afternoon Mrs. Wood took me aside. With one of my lame editorials in her hand, she said, “I know this isn't who you are. I know you. You have passion. Sit down and write something with teeth in it!”

The greatest temptation is to forget who you are. When you and I signed with Jesus' team, we vowed to play by His rules, no matter what the cost, even if it meant then, and still means, taking an unpopular stand. When we signed with Jesus, his ethic, his way, his love, became our core identity. And you know -- there's something incredibly freeing about that. Because:

We don't have to earn this identity.

We don't have to deserve it.

We don't even have to defend it.

All you have to do is live it. And when we live into HIS identity, all those other conflicting, competing identities – all those other worries and fears – well, they don't disappear, but they do all fall into their proper place.

To God be the glory!

ⁱ Julie Zauzmer and Stefano Piterlli, "'Lead us not into' what? Pope Francis suggests changing the words of the Lord's Prayer." *Washington Post*, December 8, 2017

ⁱⁱ Matthew 6:8

ⁱⁱⁱ Romans 7:19, this is my own paraphrase

^{iv} Fred Craddock, *Preaching Through the Christian Year B*,

^v Michael Lindvall, from a sermon "The Really Big Temptation" preached at the Brick Presbyterian Church, New York City, March 5, 2006

^{vi} *ibid*

^{vii} *ibid*

^{viii} John Patrick Pullen, Casey Quackenbush, Jennifer Calfas and Abigail Abrams, "What to Know About Alleged Florida School Shooter Nikolas Cruz", *Time*, February 15, 2018

^{ix} Sebastian Junger, from a video "Sebastian Junger on Mass Public Shootings in the United States" Vimeo.com

^x Thomas G. Long, *Whispering the Lyrics*, CSS Publishing, 1995, 20.