

Sunday, February 17, 2013
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “Lead Us Not Into Temptation”

If the devil were going to tempt you – what would he use?

What sort of temptations do you struggle with in your life?

Each of us has a vulnerable spot – something that would get to us.

The dictionary defines the word tempt as:

to entice or allure to do something often regarded as unwise, wrong, or immoral;

or to attract, appeal strongly to, or invite.

Our moral compass often enables us to resist the temptation to do something unwise, wrong or immoral.

However, we are not so predisposed to resist those things or situations that attract, appeal strongly to, or invite us.

By nature we seem to be drawn in by dreams of bigger, better and different.

Temptation comes in many guises.

In today’s passage the devil taunts Jesus with the psalm we heard earlier:

He will command his angels concerning you,

to protect you,

and on their hands they will bear you up,

so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

I am unnerved by the devil quoting psalms.

I don’t like the idea of temptation disguising itself as protection, nourishment or safety.

I want to see the distinction between good and evil.

I want to be certain that I am making conscious choices about resisting temptation.

Ah, but temptation comes in many guises.

Notice how none of the temptations Jesus was presented with were "sinful" in themselves.

In fact, each of them would feature in Jesus' ministry at some point –

he did miraculously create food for the crowds;

he did receive all authority in heaven and earth;
and he did defy death.

The temptation was not having the power – but how to use the power.

We may do great good, but if it's for our own selfish gain, we have failed to embody God's will.

In our world today, we are often faced with subtle temptations.

I read a fascinating essay this week about how religion, advertising, and marketing have long been intertwined in this country.

Reverend Dr. Guy Sayles explored how 19th century religious revivalism in America helped to *create the climate* and *structure the models* that modern advertising uses to this day.

He pointed out that the message and settings of the revivals served to demonstrate the power of persuasion.

“On the fringes of camp meetings, to which people came not just for religion but for socializing and entertainment, peddlers of patent medicines hawked their wares, promising relief from physical and emotional ailments.

Like the preachers in the meetings, they promised miracles and used "before and after" testimonials from satisfied customers who found amazing cures in their products.

Inside the meetings, people were saying "before I met Christ, I was a drunk or a gambler or a crook, but now I'm on the straight and narrow."

Outside the meetings, people were saying "before I tried Grove's elixir or Carter's pills, I had bad digestion or constant pain, but now I am free."

The pattern for advertising was set, a pattern that persisted through the nineteenth century and prevails today:

- identify (or create) and dramatize a need,
- promise that your product will meet it,
- and move your customer to buy it.

In many ways advertising has become the institutionalized devil of temptation in our culture.

In a booklet called “Gods At War: Defeating the Idols that Battle for Your Heart” the author suggests that “A god is what we sacrifice for and what we pursue....The instant something takes the place of God, the moment it becomes an end in itself, rather than something to offer to God, it becomes an idol.

Absolutely anything at all can become idolatry once it becomes a substitute for God in our lives.”

Temptations are not always tangible.

It is not only our quest for more stuff that we are talking about – it is power, prestige, position, beauty – intangibles that exist only in our hearts and minds.

As you go about your lives, seeking to fulfill unmet needs, ask yourself who or how that need was identified or created in your life.

Are you responding to promises of satisfaction and fulfillment that have been defined by someone else?

Is your restlessness generated by trying to meet cultural ideals?

Has the devil been able to seduce you into jumping off the cliff by promising something you long for?

In our reading today, Jesus deflects the devil's offers by citing scripture and relying on his faith.

For Jesus, God comes first – before food, power, and safety.

The Bible tells only two temptation stories, the temptation of Adam and Eve and the temptation of Christ.

The first is the story of temptation that led to humanity's fall.

The second is the story of temptation which led to Satan's fall.

All other temptations in human history have to do with these two stories.

Either we are tempted in Adam, seeking power that is not ours, or we are tempted in Christ and able to draw on our faith to resist Satan's offer.

Either the Adam in us is tempted – in which case we fall.

Or the Christ in us is tempted – in which case Satan is bound to fall.

I believe that these temptations are still the ones that face us today.

We labor to provide for our basic human needs.

We struggle to make the right decisions, to choose the right college and career to be certain that we will have some power in the world.

We work hard to be able to live someplace where we will be safe – in some instances even guarded – so that no harm will befall us.

So what do you sacrifice for? What are you pursuing?

We are barraged with opportunities, distractions and messages that keep us from remembering that God is the center of our lives.

We may endeavor to keep God and our faith as our center – but it is hard.

One of the reasons we gather together each week is to fortify ourselves for this ongoing struggle.

Just as Jesus was able to quote Deuteronomy to defend his positions, so we are offered a chance to learn the scriptures and strengthen our faith.

My friends, we are human beings – broken and flawed.

We all make mistakes.

We make choices that we might regret.

We succumb to pressures that we wish we could overcome.

This is all part of life.

The Good News, however, is that God is full of mercy, forgiveness and grace.

As we mark this first Sunday of Lent, I invite you to start our journey by forgiving yourself for your shortcomings.

Lay aside burdens that you are carrying and free yourself to journey toward Easter with a lighter load.

Join us on Wednesday night this week as we explore ways to forgive not just ourselves, but others and God, as well.

As we journey with Jesus to the end of his earthly life I share this from our workshop last weekend on end of life planning.

Palliative Care Dr. Ira Byock, in his book “The Four Things That Matter Most” points out that having been at the deathbeds of hundreds of patients over the years he has heard four sentences that change everything:

Please forgive me

I forgive you

Thank you

I love you.

Let these be the words that sound from your lips and your hearts this Lent.