

**Sunday, February 22, 2015**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon – “Temptation to Grace”**

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Mark is a man of few words.

He tells us the temptation story without any of the details provided in Luke or Matthew’s gospels.

He simply says, “He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan.”

That’s it.

He doesn’t give us any description of Jesus’ struggle with temptation or how he overcame Satan’s charms.

We are left with a vague idea that Jesus was tempted and because he was Jesus he simply resisted that temptation.

That is not an easy response to emulate.

As we face temptation in our lives it is not easy to embrace the idea that if Jesus can do it, so can we.

Matthew and Luke, however, provide specifics that allow us to adopt Jesus’ tactics as our own.

From Matthew’s gospel, which is almost the same as Luke’s:

*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.*

*He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.*

*The tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’*

*But he answered, ‘It is written,*

*“One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” ’*

*Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,*

*“He will command his angels concerning you”,*

*and “On their hands they will bear you up,*

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

*Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." '*

*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour;*

*and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.'*

*Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written,*

*"Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." '*

*Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

One writer pointed out that what Jesus faced are truly the basic temptations in life, forming the foundation for all other temptations.

Stone into Bread = The temptation to use power for the wrong purposes.

Jump from the Rocks = The Temptation to gain popularity by performance.

Serve The Wrong Master = The temptation to idolatry.

If these are indeed the foundational temptations of our lives, when one comes our way we can draw on Jesus' lesson in resisting them.

We can also take heart in knowing that Jesus gave us the response to these temptations.

It is quite simple – not so complex that we cannot apply it to our own lives:

1. Live by the word of God.

When you are feeling anxious or conflicted, turn to scripture for guidance. There is no temptation or dilemma that you might face that has not been addressed by a psalmist, a prophet, a disciple or Jesus himself.

2. Do not put the Lord your God to the test.
3. Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.

Jesus will use this same lesson later in his ministry when he is questioned about the great commandment.

*Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, soul and mind and your neighbor as yourself.*

This is the rule of life that we have adopted as our mission statement.

This approach will help you resist any temptation that might come your way.

Technology has created new temptations in our lives that came to mind as I watched the tape of our town meeting on Friday.

I couldn't attend because I was sick and watching it on tape is interesting because you get a better sense of the looks on people's faces and the exchanges that take place off to the side.

I call this new temptation anonymity.

It is the opportunity to say things about people whom you cannot see.

It is the temptation to use misinformation (we used to call these lies) to manipulate the public's perception of an issue.

This has been mastered by our national political system and it is disheartening to know that it has successfully trickled down into our local community.

When we study the historical documents of our church we note that people were assigned to care for neighbors who might be in need.

Those neighbors were called by name.

They were known.

They were part of the community: Baptised, beloved and blessed.

When we give in to the temptation of anonymity, we talk about people we don't know; we generate fear of things unseen; and we break covenant with our God who calls us by name.

I hope that we can rise above our fears and sense of entitlement and look our neighbors straight in the eye and offer to share from our abundance.

As we begin our Lenten journey lets take a look at three disciplines that are commonly practiced in the Lenten season – prayer, giving, and fasting.

Each one connects with one of the big three temptations.

*Prayer* confronts our temptation to power, since you can't pray when you think you're in control.

When we pray we seek God's guidance and comfort to strengthen our own battle with temptations.

*Giving* confronts our temptation to accumulate wealth for it's own sake.

When we share from our own blessings, we are made richer.

Fasting confronts our temptation to allow our bodily appetites and addictions to control us.

Sacrafice reminds us of the abundance in our lives and helps us to focus on what we can live without.

During Lent, we are invited to focus more intentionally on confronting our temptations and learning, like Jesus, to overcome them and live with humility, simplicity and discipline – which,

although it may not sound like it in today's world, is actually the best and most abundant way to live.

The United Church of Christ has adopted a theme of Re-Lent for this year. The introduction to the devotionals is an invitation: *Traditionally, Lent is thought of as a season of repentance, a time of giving things up and turning our lives around – or trying to. What if we thought about Lent instead as a time of giving in rather than giving up? A time to 'relent,' to back off imposing our wills on everything? To let go of a little bit of our need for control and let God be God. The writers suggest that we endeavor to experience Lent anew, in a fresh way by giving in to God's amazing grace.*

The cover of the devotional provides both direction and invitation to: remember, redevelop, refine, rekindle, rebirth, reward, revive, restart, reform, reunite, refresh, rebuild, recycle, redeem, relieve, rebound, reflect, remind, reopen, redraw, renew, reinvent, reclaim, recreate, reboot, relax and RELENT.

Surely one of these will resonate with you!

What will you do for Lent this year?

I encourage you to use the time between now and Easter to refresh and reorient your faith life. Make a commitment to prayer each day – perhaps silent prayer where you simply give yourself and God the gift of 5-10 full minutes of attention to each other.

I will be sending you a daily thought by email. Simply allow 2-3 minutes for reflection after you have read the daily item.

Maybe you will do something more extreme – fasting for a time, or giving your time or money to an important cause.

Mark's gospel tells us that the Spirit 'drove' Jesus out into the wilderness, while Matthew and Luke say that Jesus was 'led' by the Spirit. The choice is ours to make. We can initiate our Lenten journey ourselves, choosing a discipline or practice that will honor God and help us develop healthy responses to temptation or we can wait for something to 'drive' us to God and pray that we can endure the temptations that come our way.

Whatever it is that you choose, as Reverend Michael Piazza said in his column on Tuesday: just do something.