

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Luke 9:28-36
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Psalm 91:1-2,9-16
Romans 10:8b-13

March 10, 2019
The First Sunday in Lent

Temptation. If there was a central theme to today's Gospel text, I think we can all be fairly assured that this is it. It's the devil and the angel on your shoulder pulling on your conscience. It's the last piece of chocolate cake on the kitchen counter that you really don't want to share. It's the answer on your friend's exam that you can see if you just look close enough. It's the lie you could tell to save face when you have messed up or the credit you could take to get ahead when you didn't really do the work. It's the flirtation that you tell yourself won't hurt anyone.

We all know what temptation feels like. And in our gut, we know when we have chosen right and when we have chosen wrong. I would even venture to say that the right answer, the moral choice, is often quite clear. However, it's the debate within in our own hearts and minds that causes it to get muddled with promises of success and ease and satisfaction.

Temptation is powerful. On the surface, it's the quick fix to happiness. In reality, it's the source of deep dissatisfaction. And yet, we fall victim to it over and over again. Convincing ourselves that a little deception won't hurt anyone.

I love the Greek translation of the word temptation. It is defined as a trial of a person's fidelity, integrity, and virtue. A trial of fidelity. That is a test of your faithfulness to a person, cause, or belief. A trial of integrity. A test of the quality of your honesty and moral principles. A trial of virtue. A test of your outward behavior where you choose to live into high moral standards. Fidelity, integrity and virtue. In other words...can we be faithful to the things we believe in and the commitments we have made even if the world pulls us in other directions? Can we remain honest and moral even when it may mean we don't always come out on top or get the satisfaction we desire? And, can we make those choices publicly even when it's hard or unpopular?

If we can gain anything from the Gospel this morning it's that temptation is not to be taken lightly, no matter how much we may justify it as insignificant or unimportant.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus is asked to turn his back on what he knows his right. The temptation to do so starts small enough – just turn this stone into a loaf of bread...I mean, really...who would ever know? It's just a rock and the bread will be good to eat. It will just be between you and me.

Temptation works like that. It often starts with a seemingly insignificant act. Something simple that draws us in, that makes it easy to choose something that we know isn't right. But we do it anyway, telling ourselves that no one will ever know.

But, if you take that first step, the temptation grows and it becomes easier and easier to convince yourself that you deserve more. Come on, Jesus, just one more thing and look at how easy your life will be. This way is better. I promise. You want it...you know you do.

Temptation always starts with creating a small amount of doubt – don't believe what you have been taught. I know better. Then it progresses to an attempt to undermine what we know to be true and good, to discredit those moral voices that have stood by us and helped to guide us. They don't know what they are talking about – temptation says.

And, if you're thinking...certainly I wouldn't fall victim to that! I always make good choices. Well folks, think again.

Temptation doesn't care about how good we think we are or how grounded we are in our faith. It doesn't take into account how often you go to church or how often you read your bible. Temptation will at one time or another enter our hearts.

Case in point...in our Gospel, Jesus has just been baptized. Things were going great for Jesus – he is full of the Holy Spirit. He is on a spiritual high. His faith is strong. And right when things are going well and he is full of goodness, the rug is jerked out from under him and he is thrown into the desert to be tempted and tested.

If that had happened to any one of us, we might have been quick to take the easy way out. To push back on unfair circumstances. To throw up our hands at what we thought was right and what we believed to be true. Here is how that kind of thinking goes...you were following the right path, doing all of the right things, being a good person and then things happen to derail your confidence in the good choices you have made. You don't get the job promotion. Things aren't going so well at home. You're stressed. You're tired. Your child is sick or a parent dies. This just isn't fair. Why me, God? Isn't my life supposed to be better? I deserve more than this. Well, maybe I'll just cheat a little to make up for the hardship, maybe I will have another drink, flirt with this person at the office. I deserve to have a little fun, right? Temptation digs in.

Yet, when temptation digs in, Jesus doesn't let it take hold.

He stays with what he knows to be true and good and faithful. Even though his circumstances have pushed him to desperate places. He doesn't turn his back on God but instead, turns toward God. And in doing so, he finds the answers he needs to make the right choices. Not easy choices but the right choices.

Frederick Buechner describes it as listening to your life. He says, "Listen to what happens to you, because it is through what happens to you that God speaks."

What does that mean when it comes to temptation – that is through what happens to you that God speaks? I think it means that we need to listen to why we feel tempted in the first place.

What is it within us that is pulling us away from what we know to be right? What are we hungry for?

And once we name what we are hungry for, we have to be able to say – God I can't do this on my own. I'm feeling pulled in directions I know aren't right. I need you. Once we name the temptation and name our weakness we are then able to turn it over to God and say help me, Lord. Help me to be faithful and honest. Help me do what is right even if doing what is right is difficult.

This Lenten season, as you begin a time of self-reflection and repentance, consider moving into your own wilderness and facing the temptation that pulls at your heart. Face it with God by your side. Let the love of God show you the path forward. Amen.