

## ***Turn To The Lord***

Matthew 4:1-11

March 13, 2011

### **I.**

Some sermons are more difficult than others. Today's sermon is especially challenging because it invokes the idea that people should practice what they preach. That applies to me here.

For example, I urge us to read the Bible, and I read the Bible. I emphasize the importance of prayer, and I pray. And I often discuss the virtues of going to church. Obviously, I go to church.

But today's readings also suggest that I tell you to resist temptation. There's the problem. I cannot say that I always resist temptation. I imagine most of us would say the same.

I'm reminded of the time that an angel reported to God that ninety-five percent of the people on earth gave into temptation. Only five percent remained steadfast. This caused God to send another angel to confirm those numbers, and he got the same report.

So God sent a letter to the five percent to thank them and encourage them. How many people here know what that letter said? I see you didn't get one either.

But we should not be discouraged. We can work on it. Today is the first Sunday in Lent, and I would ask us to think of these next forty days as a journey, perhaps even something like a cruise.

Our ship departed from port Ash Wednesday when we affirmed that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. Our boarding pass contained a long list of our shortcomings, including pride, hypocrisy, impatience, and our self-indulgent ways. As we travel we will make some stops along the way during our worship on Sunday and our Lenten program on Wednesday evenings.

Then we will return to port on Good Friday to anticipate that those many shortcomings have been redeemed by the sure and certain hope of God's forgiveness. Finally we will disembark and claim our bags on Easter as we embrace the promise of eternal life given in the resurrection.

Will it be a good cruise? Will we be refreshed and feel closer to God? Perhaps we will have special memories of experiencing something for the first time, or more deeply. Perhaps we will share the blessings of our trip with others after we return.

This approach to Lent suggests that while the next six weeks will be a time of introspection and self-examination, it does not have to be a dismal or gloomy experience. Although we will take stock of our imperfections, we also can joyfully strengthen our faith by remembering how God in Jesus Christ helps us with temptations the enemy places in our paths.

### **II.**

And today's readings consistently presented that theme, didn't they? Beginning with the Collect of the Day, and continuing with the Old Testament lesson, the Psalm, the New Testament lesson, and the Gospel, we heard a lot about sin and temptation.

Two of these were especially well-known Bible stories. First was the fateful account of original sin; the fall of humanity when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. Then there was the equally classic and pivotal story of Satan's temptation of Jesus in the desert.

We heard how Jesus, in the wilderness of Judea, did what Adam did not do in the garden of Eden. And it shows how Satan tempts us with things that seem good, but actually are destructive.

Preachers sometimes use the story of Jesus' temptation as an example for humanity. They say that Jesus resisted temptation, and therefore we also should be able to do the same. Very simple. End of story. Just do what Jesus did. Right?

Well, perhaps there's more to it. Temptation is everywhere. And today I would like to address two parts of the issue. The first is how Satan's temptation of Jesus is relevant to our lives today. The second is how to deal with the insidious ways in which temptation can work.

### III.

The first question, which is how the Gospel applies to us, might raise some nagging doubts. Perhaps this dramatic confrontation between Jesus and Satan was different from our situations.

After all, we are not sons of God or daughters of God in the way Jesus is the Son of God. We were not blessed at our baptisms with a booming voice from heaven saying that God was well pleased with us. We do not have supernatural powers and cannot perform miracles.

Doesn't it seem that Jesus had advantages we don't have? He was both divine and human. He was perfect and we are not. Perhaps he was walking around in the desert with an ace in his pocket and the deck was stacked against Satan. If that's true then why should we think we can resist temptation simply because Jesus did so?

And Jesus also knew he would sit at God's right hand in heaven. He knew the difficulties and trials of this world would be temporary burdens. While this does not minimize the horror of the crucifixion, Jesus could be confident that God would redeem his suffering.

So, doesn't it seem that everything was destined to work out in the end for Jesus? He knew he would die, but also knew he would be resurrected. He said so to his disciples several times. Resisting temptation should have been natural for him.

But what if we look at it from another perspective? Then we could say of course Jesus had an ace in his pocket. God put it there. We are in the same position. All of us as Christians carry that same ace because God, through Jesus, put it there for us. All we have to do is play the card.

What does that mean? Well, certainly Jesus knew he eventually was going to heaven. Don't we believe the same about ourselves? Don't we know that if we have accepted Jesus Christ as our savior, we also will inherit the Christian promise of eternal life in our Lord's presence?

And what if Jesus knew that his difficulties on earth were temporary? Don't we know the same? Don't we also believe that the trials of this world will give way to eternal joy in the next?

So, if the fix was in for Jesus, it also is in for us. That's the point. Jesus' knowledge about his own destiny as God's son was much like what we know about our own destinies as Christians.

As a result, we *can* look to Jesus for help through temptation. He *is* the example to which we aspire, even though we cannot always live up to it. And he showed us how to resist.

Each response Jesus gave to Satan was from the Book of Deuteronomy. We do not live by bread alone (8:3). Do not test the Lord (6:16). Worship the Lord only (6:13). Straight from Scripture. Just as Jesus turned to faith to deliver him from temptation, we are called to do the same.

And the Bible says that Jesus is able to sympathize with our weaknesses because he has been tempted just as we are (Heb. 4:15). He knows how Satan tries to separate us from God because he already has experienced it. And he also knows that Satan can be very clever and diabolical in leading us into disobedience.

#### **IV.**

This is the second matter I mentioned earlier; the insidious way in which temptation can work in our lives. And I might start with an example of the fellow who gave up donuts for Lent. Later he arrived home with a big box of Krispy Kremes, one of them partially eaten.

His wife knew of his Lenten plans, and asked why he stopped for donuts. He said, "I told God that if he wanted me have some donuts, there would be a parking place open right in front of the bakery. And sure enough, on the seventh time around the block, there it was!"

This story illustrates temptation at work. It shows how we can rationalize things that are not evil in and of themselves, even though they are not what God wants for us.

Indeed, that is what Satan proposed to Jesus. He offered bread, and Jesus was hungry. He explained how the angels could have shown right away that Jesus was the Son of God, which would have made his lengthy travels unnecessary. And he also would have made Jesus ruler of the world right then, and Jesus could have solved the world's problems.

Some of these might not have been inherently bad things. Changing stones to bread or being saved by angels were not immoral or violations of Jewish law. But at their core, Satan's proposals were intended to draw Jesus away from obedience to God's will.

This happens today in the church and our lives. Satan attacks the church not to destroy it, but to weaken it by turning it away from faithful worship and reliance on Scripture. He does this overtly through division and conflict, and more subtly through causing the church to function only as a secular social service organization rather than also as the worshipful Body of Christ.

We also experience it. Satan does not tempt us with unpleasant things. They come in pretty packages with plausible explanations. They affect things that matter in our jobs, families, and marriages. They contain small truths wrapped in larger lies, and try to separate us from God.

And we all are susceptible. I am tempted. You are tempted. It happens all the time. Temptations seem to be like the Whack-A-Mole game at the arcade. You beat one down and another pops up.

St. Paul addressed this in First Corinthians when he said, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to everyone" (10:13). And Jesus said in Luke that things that cause us to sin are bound to come (17:1).

These passages are foundational to New Testament theology. They recognize that temptation always will be with us. Although we are not perfect like Jesus, we can trust God to show us the way out to escape the power of the enemy.

But what happens when we inevitably trip up? And it always seems to happen, doesn't it? What do we do then? Same thing. God still is faithful. If we acknowledge our shortcomings and sincerely ask for strength to overcome the evil forces that beset us, his promise to show us the way out still is reliable.

#### **V.**

This is how we deal with temptation. We cannot contend with Satan directly or confront him as Jesus did in the wilderness. Satan is too strong and we have other options. We just turn away from the devil and toward our Lord and Savior. He's been there. He's done that. He knows what we feel, and through the Spirit he can help us do what God calls us to do.

If we trust in that reality, then experiencing temptation is not a weakness in our soul, and standing up to it with God's help shows the strength of our faith. *Amen.*