

“Temptation”  
Psalm 25:1-10; James 1:12-16;  
Mark 1:9-15

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent, February 21, 2021  
Pastor Norman Fowler  
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

Jesus was tempted. There’s something that seems a little odd to me about that phrase. I don’t think about Jesus being *able* to be tempted, I guess. That it says Jesus was tempted feels a little odd. How can he be tempted, the Son of God? And yet, Jesus as a human being recognizes and experiences temptation.

Indeed, Mark tells us Jesus went into the wilderness and faced the trial, the temptation of the accuser. That is, there’s some inner desire and outside influences inviting him to do something that is wrong or unwise, that would have some level of evil consequence leading to greater brokenness in the lives around him, the relationships with others, with creation, or with God.

I still am just amazed that this can be, that Jesus can experience temptation. What kind of temptation would it have been? James suggests it begins with human desires. Somehow evil enters in. One way of thinking about evil is a good that is twisted such that you may have a desired end that is good, but the means of getting there are terrible. Or perhaps for some of us, we have an end that, as we get closer to it, is not quite what we expected it to be. It feels like the goal we were convinced we needed to try to accomplish all of a sudden doesn’t seem to be quite what we thought it should be. Somehow it seems like we have been misled. It doesn’t live up to its hype. Or, it could be a misuse of power creating unexpected problems. It could be missing the reality of a situation, not being humble enough to recognize it, and forcing our way through with a reality that is not complete, not quite real. Somehow Jesus was tempted by these as well. If Jesus can be tempted, should we be surprised that we have trials and temptations?

When I say the word “temptation,” it is interesting to think about what the first word that comes to mind might be. Is it chocolate or something else like that? Or is it something like sin, the more general idea of a way we go astray, we miss the mark, we go off the path? If we’re going to talk about temptation, it feels to me that we need some kind of image of what that means. A description of what sin might look like. I want to think about an image that gives us a general way of thinking about sin rather than describing an individual sin. I’m going to try a couple of things here.

First, if you have some people making music together – a band or some people singing together – for that to work, they have to work together. There can be some improvisation if they are working it out together, but it feels in that case that what evil suggests to those involved is that they really have a great voice and that they should be soloing all the time. Or they play their instruments wonderfully and they should be soloing all the time. Sin is when that begins to happen. Can you imagine listening to a group of folks playing or singing when they are each doing their own solo and not paying attention to what other people are doing? Sin takes us off on the wrong paths and breaks the right relationships, the way of working things out.

Some of us aren't so musical. I grew up playing a lot of basketball. Another way of thinking about sin would be playing with a group of guys on a basketball team, and in the process, one person tries to hold onto the ball all the time and tries to take all the shots. If you have a team of folks who are all trying to do that, it's not much of a team.

We could keep going with analogies. With a garden, if I don't do the things necessary to make the garden work, create the harmony that's needed – the right amount of water, the right seeds, the right soil, the right tending – it can just become a weed patch with nothing worthwhile growing.

So when we think about temptation, it is that kind of temptation that asks us to break the shalom, the harmony that God would create and wants us to live into – the working together, the making of a world that is a good place to be and live and grow together.

As we are thinking about the temptations, we realize that there are times in our lives where they become more present. Let's think of that time as the wilderness time. These days, some of us tend not to think of wilderness as a time of temptation, but a place to go for renewal. But in Jesus' time, the wilderness was out with the wild animals. It was a dangerous place. It was a place of bandits. It was not a place of renewal. So let's think about that kind of wilderness place. A place where temptations become greater.

It feels to me in some ways this pandemic time is a wilderness time for some of us. We get that pandemic fatigue, and we begin to struggle with trying to do the right things to keep each other safe or to figure out how to make it through without turning to things that aren't useful or good. Or it can be when our life expectations are unmet. It feels like this last year has been a time where expectations, the normalcy, the hope for the growth of good has been diminished. We have seen more problems. We have seen more division. We have seen more racism. We have seen more struggle. It feels like a time of temptation. A temptation to try to ignore the problems, to ignore things like structural racism and systematic poverty, or ignore the issues we might have with other people, or ignore the struggles of others and focus only on our own. There are all kinds of temptations in the wilderness of our world.

It's too easy to be invited to blame, to live in fear, and to think that helps our lives in some way. It's too easy to ignore history, to deny changes and disregard relationships. In the midst of our wilderness experience we have so many temptations.

Lent invites us to think about our wilderness time, invites us to recognize that the temptation that I think is under all of those is a temptation to turn from God and to try to go it on our own rather than to hear Jesus' call to repentance and to turn to God. To turn and find out again about the grace of God. It is indeed as we think about our own wilderness times, where I go back to the Psalm and how it reminds us that we need to set our wilderness time, our temptation time, in a context. The context the Psalm describes is the mercy and steadfast love of God, reminding us that we can trust that the true context which is that mercy and steadfast love. The true context is where we

have a God who wants to show us the way, to be our guide into the goodness of life and into the grace we can show each other. It's a context of hope. It's easy to forget that in the wilderness. It's easy to forget that in facing temptations. Yet the larger context we have is hope. Hope in a God who loves, who knows us, who recognizes our momentary struggles.

One of the things that I think keeps us from looking to that hope is a struggle with humility. That same Psalm suggests that God can teach the humble. It's so easy in the midst of the struggles and the concerns in our lives to think that we need to hold on more tightly, that we need to figure it all out and make it work on our own, to think we can do it, or should be able to do it. God, instead, invites us to recognize that all our truth as we know it is partial, and to come to the one who is truth, the one who, as we come in humility, will teach us the way. The Psalm says, "God leads the humble in what is right and teaches the humble God's way. Good and upright is the Lord, therefore God instructs sinners, the broken and the lost, in the way."

If we want to learn to sing together, if we want to learn to play together, if we want to learn to live together, we come humbly to God and humbly into relationships with one another. It is in that humility that we can come to God. Even Jesus, when he was tempted in the wilderness, if we look at the other accounts, doesn't just go on his own and say, "I know from within that this is the right thing." He says, "The Word of God says..." He knows that his dependence is on God. He's not independent of God. It's his own humility to look always to God that leads him through his own temptation. We are invited to come humbly to receive that grace as well.

Finally, we can't live in the midst of temptation all the time. We need help. We need the ministrations of angels as did Jesus. I don't know how often we get the ministrations of some heavenly beings, but I know that we do get the ministrations of angels, the very saints of God, the family of faith, the community of Christ, those following Jesus who let the Spirit be at work in them. We need the help of those angels as they bring the grace of God into our lives and show us the fruits of the Spirit. I believe we all need those fruits. We need to receive them as well as give them. We need to receive the love, the joy, the peace, the patience, the kindness, the generosity, the faithfulness, the gentleness, the self-control that are the fruits of the Spirit. That is the help that God brings. It is the very fruits of the Spirit that, as we receive them and as we open up again that we might be those who can give them, allow us to be the help that God brings alive in the family of faith and to the world. It ministers to us. It enables us to get through our wilderness experience.

So as we go into Lent, we remember Jesus was tempted and so will we be tempted as well. We will experience that temptation. We will know that temptation can trip us up. It makes us feel like life is taxing and tough. But Lent reminds us to turn not *from* God, but *to* God. Through humility we see that God is our hope and God is our help, and we recognize we have angels in our lives and are invited to become those angels ourselves. Thanks be to God. Amen.