

Temptation

By: Penny Holste

February 14, 2016. Pastor Penny's message is about temptation, from Jesus being tempted in the wilderness by the devil in Luke 4:1-13, to how we are sometimes tempted to forget our identity as Christians.

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We begin this morning in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A mother was listening to her four-year-old recite the Lord's Prayer and she said, "and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." That's how she heard it. And there was a bumper sticker that said, "and lead us not into temptation, because we'll find it for ourselves." And that unfortunately is too true, isn't it? Temptation is the topic of the gospel story today. And I think when we think of temptations, we think of being tempted to have that second piece of cake or another glass of wine, or maybe watch one more TV show or play one more video game, even though we know we have other things to do. But as we hear about Jesus' temptations, we begin to see that there's something much deeper than a piece of cake involved in temptation. And I think that this story of Jesus' temptation is kind of like an onion. We have to sort of peel away the layers to get to the real message, which I believe God has for us today.

The first layer to peel off is what do we do with the devil? Okay, with Satan. I mean the whole story was like a dream, wasn't it? In an instant, Satan showed him all the kingdoms of the world. And so we have to think, who is this Satan? Was it a real person? Was Jesus dreaming this? Was this a way that he personified evil, to explain to his followers this time of testing that he went through? And you know, that makes sense in a lot of ways, because evil sometimes just seems to have a life of its own. We think of all the horrible things that have happened through history when mobs get violent. But it doesn't even take a mob. If you've been at a meeting or at a party, you can see that one or two people can change everything. They can get people turned against someone, criticizing them. And you might walk away from that meeting and think, why did I vote the way I did? I didn't really think that. Or walk away from the party and think, why did I laugh at that? I don't really believe that. So often, evil just seems to have a life of its own. And I think that's often why we personify it and we call it Satan or the devil. Maybe that's what Jesus was doing.

But the most important thing to know about Jesus' temptations is to know what happened just before he was tempted. He was baptized. He was baptized, and the Spirit came into him and he heard the voice of the Father saying, you are my Son whom I really love and am really pleased with. And then that same Spirit led him to the wilderness, where for 40 days he was tempted by Satan. And he didn't eat in those 40 days, so at the end he was very hungry. And that's when I think we're most vulnerable, isn't it, when we are empty -- whether it's physically or spiritually -- when we are empty and hungry for something. So that's when the devil comes and says well then, just change this stone into bread. But you know, I think throughout the wilderness tempting, and in this temptation as well, Jesus must have heard the sound of his Father's voice reverberating in his mind and in his heart: but you are my Son. And so he detected that this wasn't the plan that God had for him and that God, who would take care of his beloved Son, would certainly feed him at the right time. And he said no, I won't do it. And he quoted scripture. And he refused to give in. It seemed as though it was a matter of being tempted by food.

The second temptation, the devil takes them to see all the kingdoms of the world and says: these are mine. Just worship me and all the authority and glory will belong to you. But again, Jesus had the words of the Father in his head: you are my Son. In you I am well pleased. He knew that God would provide for him, and that at the right time and in the right place he would receive the glory and the authority that he deserved. So he quoted scripture and said no, I won't do it. And it seemed as though it was a matter of being tempted by glory or power.

Finally, the third time the devil gets smart and starts quoting scripture to Jesus, figuring that's the way to do it. He says, why don't you (they're on top of the temple) just jump off of this, because right here in the Psalms it says the angels will catch you and you will be protected. But Jesus knew who he was. He did not need this kind of testing of the Father. He knew the Father would care for him and protect him in the way that was best. And so he said no, quoted scripture, and refused. And there it seemed as though it was a matter of safety that he was being tempted.

Bread, power, safety... are those really what Jesus was being tempted to do, to give things up for those? Or was it something deeper? Because underlying all of these temptations, and all of the temptations that we feel, is the temptation to forget who we are, the temptation not to remember whose we are, because we heard the same voice in a way when we were baptized: you are sealed by the Holy Spirit and blessed with the cross of Christ forever. You are a child of God. These were the promises given to us. And in every temptation we face -- it may be a temptation about power, it may be a temptation about another piece of cake -- but underneath it all is the temptation to forget our own identity as sons and daughters of God. And we're being pressured so much to forget. Advertisers are always telling us what we lack, what we need, we're not prestigious enough or glamorous enough, or healthy enough. And so we should buy the car, the hair product, the medicine to save us, because we're not enough. Or the politicians are always telling us what's wrong with the country, so that we will vote for them and they will be our saviors and change everything. So often the way to undermine our identities is through fear.

I was talking to a pastor who long ago had a call to a very wealthy section of Detroit, and when he came to his first meeting of the council (and this is Missouri Synod so they were all men) he said they sat around the first meeting and they were worried. They were fearful that they wouldn't be able to keep the lights on in the building. And how could they do this? And they were analyzing the budget very thoroughly. Well, this seemed to happen every time they met. So, three months into the call he got up in the pulpit and he -- and his wife was sitting there, and she said I was sinking down when he started talking -- and he said you know, if you want to keep the lights on in this building you just have to tithe. He said we sit at meetings and you talk about nickels and dimes how to keep this \$250,000 building going, and you go home to your \$400,000 homes. He said just tithe. Well of course there was a meeting right after that, and they said: you can't say that! You can't preach that! And he said yes I can, I'm called by God. That's the truth. Well, eight of the ten leaders of the congregation resigned and threatened to leave. Six of them came back. And with the remaining leaders and families, they were able to build a half million dollar addition to the church within five years -- and then there was another addition after that. It was simply a matter that they forgot who they were. They thought of themselves as business people, trying to keep all the dollars and cents in a row. They forgot that they were chosen people, that they were loved, protected, and that God had died for them. Because that of course is why Jesus was tempted to begin with: because Jesus, who was God, was willing to come and be a person and suffer temptation and be tortured and be killed, so that we would know beyond a doubt how much God loves us, so that we would know that God understands what we're going through and is with us. And Jesus was raised from the dead on Easter so that we would know beyond a doubt that God has the final word, that God's word is stronger than evil, stronger than fear, stronger even than death.

Now, I know that our temptations are a lot more complicated than a piece of cake or a video game, that many of us struggle with balancing work and family and hobbies and health and commitment to the church. And I know that as citizens we struggle to balance giving people jobs and taking care of the environment, caring for the needy, keeping our country safe. But in all of this, in all of this, we need to remember who we are, that our identity does not depend on what we have or what we do, or the decisions we make, or even that we fall on our face and fall into temptation. But finally, our identity rests completely on the fact that we are loved, that we are protected, that we are chosen by God, and that we live in the promise that one day we will live out our identity perfectly as daughters and sons of God.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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