

A sermon preached on 1st Sunday of Lent, February 18, 2024
at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT by The Rt. Rev. Gordon Scruton

Genesis 9:8-17. Psalm 25:1-9. 1 Peter 3:18-22. Mark 1:9-15

+++++

What are the most significant temptations you are experiencing at this time in your life?
What do you think are the major temptations our nation and world are facing at this time?

Often our minds are racing with all we have to do, or want to do, so we don't even notice the temptations we are experiencing from the world, the flesh and the devil; temptations to be less than the loving people God created us to be. So, every year, the Gospel for the first Sunday of Lent invites us to reflect on the temptations of Jesus. Both Matthew and Luke list specific temptations Jesus experienced in the wilderness.

This year we are reading the Gospel of Mark which is the earliest Gospel written and the shortest one, because Mark is very concise in telling the story of Jesus. In fact, Mark only uses 2 sentences to tell us about the temptation of Jesus. He says nothing about the specific temptations Jesus faced. So today, the lectionary includes first, Mark's story of the Baptism of Jesus, then his temptation, and then what he preached after his temptation in the wilderness. By reading these three stories together, God has some deep wisdom for us in our temptations.

During his baptism of Jesus, heard a message that was crucial for him to absorb before he encountered his temptations in the wilderness. It is also crucial for us as we encounter our daily temptations in the wilderness of our lives.

As Jesus came up out of his baptism in the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove and a voice from God spoke saying to him: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Here at the beginning of his adult ministry, God affirms his love for Jesus. This was a crucial experience to sustain Jesus during his wilderness temptation.

Over the years some people have confided with me that their parents never told them or showed them that they loved them. Children who have never experienced the verbal and physical love of their parents often go through life with a deep wound. They may spend the rest of their lives looking for the love they never received as children. They often look for love in the wrong places and ways. Many never learn how to love others. Some crave being loved and valued, but the only way they know how to get attention is to behave badly, hoping that negative attention will make others see they are important. If we did not experience adequate love as children or adults, it is sometimes difficult to recognize that our Heavenly Father loves us unconditionally.

Because Jesus experienced the love of Mary and Joseph as a child, and the love of his Heavenly Father at his baptism, he was able to resist Satan's temptations in the wilderness. Because he knew his worth, his dignity and purpose, his deep moment by moment love relationship with his Heavenly Father, he was not distracted, diminished, or swayed by the devil's temptations of power, success, flattery, or fear. Knowing that he was God's beloved child sustained him through the temptations and the anxieties of not having adequate food or water in the desert.

In this generation, we seem to be living in a wilderness situation. Our culture is increasingly marked by self-centered anger, constant verbal attacks and belittling comments. Instead of seeing dishonesty, insults, injustice, prejudiced attitudes, angry outbursts and hostile actions as temptations, we are being taught by our experience with each other, the daily news and social media that these are now acceptable, normal ways for human beings to treat each other. Few people resist, speak out about or actively work to change these destructive attitudes and ways of speaking and relating with each other which have such devastating consequences on individuals and all of society.

Now too many love starved children, who have not learned to love and respect others at home, bring chaos and verbal, sometimes physical violence to school, instead of respectful, cooperative willingness to work and learn together. Teachers and children must practice training for active shooter drills, reminding them all that school may not be a safe place to be. Young people become depressed and sometimes commit suicide because of the nasty insulting words classmates speak about them in person and on social media. With constant shootings in public places and relentless wars killing thousands of people around the world, we are reminded daily that we no longer value each other as God's beloved children. Human beings are tempted to believe that since they are not valued, loved or respected, why bother to keep on living?

We as individuals and as a national and global village need to hear the voice of God crying out in the wilderness of our society and world saying: You are all my beloved children. I created you in love to live lives of love. Would you wake up and embrace this good news and invite me to help you return to the loving respect for each other which I created you practice?

When we see and experience God's love for us, and for all people, all creation, we look at the world with different eyes. We begin to recognize the many temptations we face personally and as a society to be less than loving toward God and each other. When we recognize our temptations as they arise, we can ask God to help us resist temptations in that moment, instead of mindlessly falling into temptations.

In the wilderness and throughout his life, Jesus kept turning to the Spirit of God for guidance continuously, throughout each day. He said, "I only say and do what my Father tells me to say and do." And we see the results in his Spirit guided life. He knew how to embody love. He knew what to think, do and say at the right time, with the right attitude.

How often throughout each day do you pause, like Jesus, to ask the Spirit of God to guide you with whatever you are thinking or doing?

One day a friend, who had been both an alcoholic and drug addict, who by the grace of God was led to recovery, told me that he was an 18-20 prayer a day man. I asked what he meant by that. He said, at the end of each day he kneels down by his bed and reviews the day in his mind, checking for gratitudes and counting how many times he checked in with God during the day. If he didn't check in at least 18 or 20 times, he knew that he was slipping back into trying to control his life on his own. He knew what a mess his life had been when he tried to be in control, so he would ask God to help him begin again the next day to check in more often with God for guidance.

If you and I try to make all our decisions on our own, it is not surprising that we often live out of our fears, blindness, and addictions, as the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil entice us.

One of our temptations is to expect perfection of others and ourselves. Curiously, God does not expect perfection. Like a parent loving a toddler who is always falling down, God keeps loving us as we keep falling and failing. God keeps trying to help us live from our Holy Spirit center of balance and orientation of love. As Paul says, all of us sin and come short of the glory of God. Yet we don't need to beat ourselves up about this reality. In humility we accept ourselves as we are, people in need of God's constant help. So, we keep asking God to teach us and change us day by day to become a bit more like God created us to become. And this spiritual journey does not need to be a relentless burden. Like little children, we can live with a sense of curiosity, wonder, amazement and gratitude for the little surprise gifts, discoveries, and challenges that come to us. We can welcome whatever comes and trust that God can guide us through and help us keep learning and loving.

Many of us are tempted to live in constant fear and despair because of the hostile divisions in our nation and the devastating wars of Russia and Ukraine, Israel/Palestine and the other global threats. It is certainly appropriate to recognize and grieve these tragedies and pray for an end to the violence and pain that haunts the world at this time in history. Yet to be overwhelmed by fear and despair is a temptation.

Jesus spoke back to Satan's temptations, grounding himself in his Heavenly Father's love and guidance. In both his temptation in the wilderness and his temptation in Gethsemane, Jesus trusted that God would bring something redemptive out of the most difficult and painful situations of his life. Now God is inviting us not to succumb to the temptation to live in fear and hopeless anxiety about the future of our nation and world, but to keep asking and trusting God to open up better ways forward in these seemingly unresolvable situations. After all, out of Christ's horrible crucifixion which looked like a total dead end, God shockingly empowered Christ's resurrection. So we can keep focused on investing our thoughts and prayers, words and actions, as God guides us, to be part of God's loving work to bring redemptive good out of all these messes in ways we can't even imagine.

In the final story in today's Gospel, when Jesus knew that it was time to leave the wilderness, he emerged and began to proclaim the Good News of God's love to the love starved people living under Roman military occupation. He came with Holy Spirit power to help people turn away from blindly following the destructive temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil and embrace Christ's transforming way of love. And Jesus gives us this same mission in the wilderness of our generation.

Let's close our eyes and be still for a few moments with all we've been reflecting on together...

Through today's Gospel, God wants us **first**, to remember and re-experience God's love for us in our birth and our baptism. Many of us have some childhood love deficits. So we ask God's love to heal and to fill up any love deficits we still have. We can keep returning to this nourishing wellspring of God's loving presence in us every day, like little children return to be hugged by parents often during each day. How might God want you to open yourself to receive fresh transfusions of God's love right now and throughout this week?...

Second, we all experience temptations each day from the world, the flesh and the devil. Right now, and this week, will you ask God to help you recognize your temptations and give you wisdom and courage to resist those temptations by trusting and following the guidance of God's Spirit in your life?...

Third, out of that deep love God has for us and for the whole world, God sends us out, as God sent Jesus out to share the good news of God's love with others in our daily life. This week, how might the Spirit of Jesus be asking you to share the Good News of Christ's love through your prayers, words and actions with some love-starved people around you?...

O God, grant us fresh transfusions of your loving presence each day; open our eyes to recognize both our temptations and the ways you want us to respond to them; and show us how to bring the Good News of your love to a love starved world, through the power of your Holy Spirit at work in and through us. Amen