

First Sunday in Lent (A/RCL)
Matthew 4.1-11
February 13, 2005
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

You will **never** see me opting for **angel** food over **devil's** food cake. If you **do**, ask, "Who **are** you and what have you done with our pastor?!" I admit also that I prefer the fragrance of Magie Noir ("**Black Magic**") over the one named **Eternity**. We've all heard of another popular scent, too, "**My Sin**." And what about the brand of cupcakes called "**Temp tee**"? Taking a turn to the dark side, the name of the group KISS is an acronym for the words "Knights in the Service of Satan." Whether it's perfume, food, or entertainment that's being marketed, Madison Avenue knows that forbidden fruit **sells**. The term "forbidden fruit" comes, of course, from the story in Genesis about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the Garden of Eden. The serpent's message is, "That which is **forbidden** is **delicious, luscious, desirable**." Otherwise, why would Eve and Adam have disobeyed a direct order from God and eaten it??

In a way, the temptations our Lord Jesus fought in the desert are foreign to us. Someone who **can't work** miracles isn't apt to be tempted to work them for the wrong reasons. We are always safe assuming that Scripture applies to our lives. But what do turning stones into bread, jumping off a parapet, and worshiping the devil in exchange for gaining control of the world have to do with **us**??

The person who wrote the NT epistle, the Letter to the Hebrews, **definitely** believed there was a **strong** point of connection between Jesus' experience and ours. He said:

For we do not have a high priest [that is, someone to intercede for us before God's throne] who is unable to sympathize with our

weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been **tested** as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Hebrews 4.15-16

I don't think we usually see moral dilemmas as clearly as all that – as either testing by God **or** temptation by the devil. If we did, we'd probably make better, more life-giving choices, truer to our core identity as children of God. Someone has described temptation like this:

It is a fork in the road, the leading of the Spirit and the opportunity of the devil, and we must choose. It is a chance to rise as much as it is a chance to fall.

The Interpreter's Bible, Matthew, p.269, exposition

In the decision-making moment, we may be overwhelmed by emotion of one kind or another, which skews our vision. A student may be full of the **fear** of failing a test and fall to the temptation of cheating. A father may be paralyzed by the **fear** of not being able to keep a roof over his family's head and fall to the temptation of stealing. A lovelorn teen jilted by her boyfriend may be overcome by **despair** that the pain will never go away, and fall to the temptation of self-destructive behavior. A woman or man may be awash in **passion** and fall to the temptation of promiscuity. A child may feel **shame** at not measuring up and fall to the temptation of lying about a grade or the outcome of a game.

Temptation:

It is a fork in the road, the leading of the Spirit and the opportunity of the devil, and we must choose. It is a chance to rise as much as it is a chance to fall.

So what do any of **those** situations, which hit close to home, have anything to do with Jesus' exotic temptations in the desert?

Ultimately, any temptation involves the urge to take God out of first place in our lives, to diminish God's importance or God's faithfulness. When we disobey **any** commandment we worship ourselves rather than God. When we cheat or steal to acquire something or someone that doesn't belong to us, we are looking out for number one, **not** our Father in heaven who gives us all that we **truly** need. When we lie to save face, we are looking out for number one instead of glorifying God who is the author of truth. When we choose entertainment or exercise or sleep over worship, we are looking out for number one instead of honoring the One who commands us to keep the Sabbath holy. When we convince ourselves that we **sin** because we **must** to **survive**, we are negating the faithfulness of the One who has lovingly counted the number of hairs on our head.

As St. Paul says:

He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?

Romans 8.32

In other words, why would we think that we would have to take matters into our own hands and **sin** to **survive**, given God's track record of loving us to the 'nth degree?

With God on our side like this, how can we lose? If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, is there anything else he wouldn't gladly and freely do for us?

Romans 8.32, *The Message*

We don't have Jesus' power to perform miracles, but we do have His power to obey, to overcome emotion and resist temptation, to honor our Father in heaven by our loving, obedient actions rather than usurping His throne by setting our own course and satisfying our own desires. We can recognize the moral fork in the road as the parting of ways between the leading of the Spirit and the temptation of the devil. No matter how

luscious, delicious, delightful, the temptation appears, we can follow the Spirit's life-giving lead, and choose to rise rather than to fall. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Olson