

TEMPTATION

Luke 4:1-13

I have a weakness for peanuts. I can't just eat one. One leads to another and another and still another. They used to advertise for Lay's potatoes chips that, "You can't just eat one." Some people have problems with M and M's. Once you start, it's hard to stop.

So often things build up like that. When you put off studying for a test until two nights before the exam, the next time you are tempted to wait until just night before. Then the time after that you don't begin until late the night before. Then you may wait until the morning of the test. Having a drink at a party leads to another—and then another. We find out how we can negotiate in our own minds to give ourselves permission to have another drink. Though we went to the party convinced, "I will only have two drinks," before we know it our mind is convinced that three won't hurt. That becomes 4 drinks. Or we glance at something we saw on the internet. Then we look at it a little longer, That leads to checking out more and more things until we can get hooked on internet pornography. We don't have to know anything about Watergate or John Edwards to know that little lies lead to big ones, like a snowball. One little sin leads to another.

Temptation—we all find ourselves caught in some kind of temptation, whether it is overeating, overworking, lust, greed, or laziness. So what can we do about temptation? At the beginning of His ministry just after He was baptized, Jesus was led out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. The devil presented three temptations to Jesus. Three times Jesus resisted. So it can appear to us that the way to overcome temptation is for us to beat it head on.

Every day we see advertisements for new diet plans. We see someone in their size 7 dress with a big smile on their face showing us a picture of how she looked several months ago before she lost 40 lbs in a miracle diet plan. Or a man shows how big the size 48 pants look over his 32 inch waste. But what those ads don't tell us is how often after losing considerable weight those same people gain it back. Look what has happened over the years to Oprah Winfrey. The temptation to overeat is something people can fight for several weeks, even for a year. But eventually, after weeks and weeks of temptation they eat something they shouldn't eat. Then they eat more of it. Before they know it, the weight is back.

Temptation is like that. It's patient. It may not overcome us today or tomorrow.

But it doesn't let up. Sooner or later we let our guard down, and it gets us. We try to be patient with our children. But then when we are under too much stress, we lose our temper. We try to fight the jealousy we have against someone else. Then one day we find ourselves saying something cruel to that person because we can't hold it back any more. You convince yourself that nothing will happen when you get intimate with a girlfriend or boyfriend. Then you find out that you are both expecting. Eventually temptation always wins out.

Then what do we do with temptation? What did Jesus do? He fought it. But He is Jesus. He is not you and me. He had the discipline to not give in. He is perfect. But it's too much for us. We are sinners.

In last Sunday's Gospel we heard about when Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus on that mountain before Jesus went to Jerusalem to die on the cross. Luke's Gospel says that talked about the "exodus" that Jesus was to take to Jerusalem. Jesus' ministry was about going on an "exodus." In the Old Testament God freed His people Israel under Moses from slavery in Egypt, led them through the Red Sea on dry ground, guided them through the wilderness, and took them to the promised land. That journey is called the "exodus." Throughout the exodus there was a problem. The people kept forsaking God to trust in something else. When the temptation came to return back to Egypt or to worship other gods, or to replace God with earthly leaders, they gave in. Temptation was too much for them. Before we point the finger of blame at them, remember that the exodus took 40 years. Imagine forty years of hardship, wandering through a desert and not knowing when you are finally settling down. It is no wonder that they fell into temptation.

But Jesus redid the exodus. He did what the people of Israel and what we fail to do. He too traveled into the wilderness. He too was tempted to trust in Himself rather than in His Father. But unlike Israel, Jesus did not give in to temptation.

Usually when they make a movie out of a book, the movie doesn't do justice to the book. Or when they remake a movie or a TV show, it is not as good as the original. Hollywood often takes liberties with the story in a book that detracts from how profound some great

works of literature can be. One exception I know of to the critics was the movie “Dr. Zhivago.” Many feel that the movie was actually better than the book. It took a dull plot, changed the story, and made it far more interesting.

Jesus changed the story by His life. The story of the people of Israel in the wilderness during the exodus is our story. Though God has made us and called us to be His people, we give in to temptation. Despite our best efforts, we screw up. But as Jesus rewrote the story of the Old Testament exodus, He rewrites the story of our lives. No longer does the story end in how we fail, but in how Jesus has succeeded for all of us.

Both our Old Testament lesson and our second lesson remind us to talk about what God has done for us. The story of Jesus’ temptation is not for us an example of how to face a temptation as much as it is the story of what God has done for us in Jesus. Jesus faced temptation for us. Let us look at this picture that describes what happened in the Old Testament:

At the top left is the symbol for God. The circle shows that He is eternal and the arrows show that He is always reaching out in love. He reaches out in this picture to the captives in Egypt. Then they go on the Exodus to the promised land. The hour glass signifies how throughout the ages the people of Israel saw this event. It was not a piece of history for them. It is a present reality. If you were to ask a Jew today, “Who went on the Exodus?” he would answer, “All Jews of all times.”

The next picture shows how the sin of Adam and Eve (the circle) led to God’s judgment (the gavel), which is death (the skull). That is not just an historical event. We too participated in that by our own sin, by how we give in to temptation. The story of Adam and Eve is our story.

The third figure shows how Jesus changed the story. He is the kneeling king in the top left who by His death (the cross), resurrection (open tomb), and ascension (the king with arms uplifted) has changed our story from death into life. The dove in the hour glass represents baptism, how God makes Jesus’ story our story. The sin that so often overwhelms us, Jesus took on Himself and defeated it by His temptation, crucifixion, and resurrection. So when we face temptation, what is most important is not how we grit our teeth, clench our fists, and convince ourselves that we can beat any temptation, but that we can look to Jesus and know He has faced temptation for us.

That story is our answer to temptation. As we hear it, as we think of it, as we live it, we have something to help us face temptation. It is a lot easier fit things into an empty box than a full one. When our lives are filled with Christ, when He on our minds, then there is less room for evil. And when He receive His forgiveness, that overcomes the doubt and guilt which can really make temptation overwhelming.

How many peanuts will I eat? Jesus didn’t give in even once. That is our strength and hope!

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February 21, 2010
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center
Ames, Iowa 50014