

TEMPTATION

A SERMON FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT  
FEBRUARY 17, 2013

PSALM 91:1-2; 9-16

First Presbyterian Church of Marianna, Florida

LUKE 4:1-13

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As we begin the Season of Lent, we remember the forty days that Jesus was in the wilderness tempted by the devil.

Temptation takes many forms. So does Satan, the embodiment of evil.

Kenny Chesney, one of my favorite country singers, had a song out four or five years ago that never made it on the charts. It was about "Demons." Now demons are sort of like Satan's emissaries, themselves little embodiments of evil. Demons are there to tempt us.

Kenny sang, "Sometimes they're in a bottle, sometimes a pair of high heeled shoes. Some come rolled in paper, some have six strings and only play the blues...But once you've met the devil, there's no way he'll let you be. When I'm not chasing demons, there's demons chasing me."

I think what Kenny means is that we will always be tempted.

I'm trying to lose weight. I've got 40 pounds to go to get to the weight that I want to be. Every Wednesday evening, after supper, when I pass by the table with the desserts, the brownies, the cookies, the pecan pie on it, I am tempted. And dear hearts, I must confess that more often than not I lose the battle, and give in to the temptation. The old hymn said "Yield not to temptation, for yielding is sin." It isn't the being tempted that is sin. Even Jesus, who did not sin, could be tempted.

We can get tempted even in church. Wednesday evenings at the potluck supper. Sunday morning with the cookies. I even got tempted, and yielded to temptation, at the Presbytery meeting last month, when that second plate full of cookies passed by.

But you know, those are trivial temptations, compared to some that face us. And you'd think the church would be the last place that one would be tempted.

But a few years ago, I had to chair a committee of Presbytery dealing with a beloved associate pastor who has carried on an affair with the former pre-school director of the church. And I've known of pastors and choir directors, pastors and church members, who have been so tempted and yielded to the temptation to an adulterous, improper relationship. But it isn't just in matters of food and sex that we can be tempted.

Recently a Roman Catholic priest was convicted of embezzlement, have stolen almost a million dollars from the church where he has served as pastor for just a very few years. Sadly, he had the right to spend up to fifty thousand dollars of the church's money without securing any one else's approval. So he bought clothes, took trips, bought expensive furniture, automobiles, boats. He was tempted, and yielded, and now will be incarcerated for a number of years.

I've known church treasurers, church book keepers, financial secretaries, who have yielded to similar temptations. And some of them were incarcerated. You'd think the church would be the last place a person would face temptation. We even had a church secretary misappropriate funds many years ago in one of the churches I served.

Thanks be to God, this church has been spared the heart-ache that comes when one of its leaders, one of its staff yields to temptation. Few other business or institutions are as blessed.

I understand that employee theft is a greater problem than shoplifting in many retail establishments. Fifty years ago, when my father was in charge of security at a department store, he caught one of his own cousins and the wife of the pastor of First Baptist Church of Knoxville shoplifting. The stuff on the shelf is displayed in a way designed to tempt us, but it is supposed to tempt us to buy, not to steal.

In the Lord's Prayer, we pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

Would God lead us into temptation? Would God put us to the test? Would God present us with an opportunity to sin, an "occasion of sin" as the Roman Catholics might call it?

Of course God would!

Who do you think planted that tree in the middle of the Garden of Eden?

Who created the serpent that tempted Adam and Eve?

Who created Satan, and let him fall from heaven?

Who created us with the ability to lust after a chocolate brownie, a tanned and shapely body, a bank full of money, all just waiting for us to help ourselves?

But God didn't create us just to be tempted. God didn't create us just to test us. God created us to be able to resist temptation, to turn from occasions of sin, to flee from evil, and to choose life instead of death, right instead of wrong.

And God created us so that having yielded to temptation, having sinned, having succumbed to evil, having chosen destruction, we can turn away from what we have chosen, and repent, and be forgiven.

As we enter the season of Lent, we are challenged to follow the example of Jesus, and resist temptation. God created us in the hope that we too could someday hear a voice from heaven saying, "This is my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased."

We don't please God by giving up chocolate for Lent, as my childhood friend Loretta did. We please God by living a life after the example of Jesus Christ, living as He lived, loving as He loved, forgiving as He forgave.

We please God by living a life in such a way that when we are tempted, we ask that classic question, "What would Jesus do?" and respond accordingly.

But you know, most of the time, we are like that those two little boys, who found only one lollipop left. Their mother found them fighting over it. She sat them down and said, "Now Robby, you and Tommy are brothers. Don't you think that if Jesus had a brother, he would let him have the last lollipop?" And Robby turned to Tommy and said, "Tommy, you be Jesus!"

It times when we are tempted, it is so easy to let someone else be Jesus.

But we are called to be Jesus, to be like Jesus, to act like Jesus, to do what Jesus would do, in every situation in life, all our days, not just the forty days of Lent.

Lent is just the season when we get to practice for the rest of the year.

Let us pray.

O Loving God, we are tempted to let someone else be Jesus. We are tempted to yield to the power, if not of Satan, then surely of temptation. Help us to be like Jesus. Help us to do what Jesus would do. Help us to live for Jesus, and as Jesus would have us live. In His name we pray. Amen.