

Lent 1: Lamenting Temptations

Matthew 4:1-11

March 13, 2011

* adapted from a previous sermon of Feb. 16, 1997 "Glimpses in the Wilderness."

The devil came to me the other day and said, "Deborah, how 'bout joining me for a little walk. It never hurts to walk and talk a little bit, now does it?"

I had to admit I couldn't see any harm in walking and talking. After all, I'm a minister of God, and so I felt fairly able to catch any demonic tricks tried on me.

The devil led me out the door and around the corner toward Gaston. We talked about nothing in particular, although there seemed to be a keen interest in what we were doing at East Dallas Christian Church.

We crossed the street and walked into the gas station on the corner. At the counter, the devil said, "I'll tell you what, I'll buy you one of these lottery tickets." From a large wad of bills, Old Scratch paid the cashier for the scratch off and handed me the ticket.

My hands trembled as I took it. I knew the jackpot this week was very large. "Hang on to that ticket and you will be a big winner," Satan said. "You won't have to work another day in your life."

Well, of course I love working at the church, but it would be nice to have a few more days off, money for travel—and perhaps even for a wedding coming up. And I could donate to all my favorite causes—like the Week of Compassion for relief in Japan (or the Hope Partnership for congregational transformation or the new church in Prosper). And we wouldn't have to worry about money for the renovation our Master Plan committee has been working on.

But of course, I knew this was one of those devilish tricks, so, not wanting to be impolite, I pocketed my ticket as we left the store, thinking that I'd tear it up later.

Then the devil took me up and showed me all the great pulpits of the Church. "You're ready to go all the way to the top!" Satan said. I thought to myself, "But

I HAVE made it to the top at East Dallas Christian church.” Still, the Great Charlatan showed me Riverside Church in New York City, the pulpit of some of the greatest preachers ever—Harry Emerson Fosdick, William Sloan Coffin, James Forbes. Suddenly I was transported to the other coast, to the Crystal Cathedral, where I saw myself dressed in a beautiful blue robe, preaching to a television audience of millions.

“All this can be yours,” Satan said. “I can build you a cathedral even bigger and grander than the ones we’ve seen, bigger than even the new plans for First Baptist Church downtown! To you I will give all of this authority and glory, for it is mine to give, and I can give it to whomever I choose. Just think of all the good you can do in a church that size.”

I gulped as I looked at all the influential pulpits in big churches that are coveted by so many preachers, but I want you to know that somehow I managed to say, “No thank you. I’ll stay right here at EDCC where I know and love the people with whom I’ve worked with for almost 5 years now. God is working a good work with us here.”

Then the devil took me to the top of the spire of Notre Dame in Paris. He let me look through the telescope they have up there at a net he had set up on the pavement below. There was a large crowd gathered around the net. They were chanting “Jump.” I could see the television crews from BBC, ABC, CNN, and FOX setting up to film the action. MTV had brought their equipment too and piped in some music, so everyone was rocking and in a festive mood.

“Go ahead, jump,” Satan said. “It’s never been done before. Just think, you will be in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. There will be endorsements, talk shows, movie contracts. Think of all the souls you will be able to save when you are famous. Don’t worry about the risk. God will keep you safe. Come on—go for it. Where’s your faith.”

I think that’s when I fainted. I’m a little afraid of heights, you see.

When I came to, the devil was gone, and I was back in my office. But I have a feeling that I’ve not seen the last of That One.

Come to think of it, I still have that lottery ticket here in my pocket. I'll put it over here on our communion table for safe keeping. If any of you would like to have it, you are welcome to take it and scratch it off.

Now, honestly, I really have not had any afternoon walks with the devil lately, or really, anyone closely resembling Beelzebub.

But I have had my moments of temptation. Like everyone else, I have my inner demons with which I wrestle. You'd think that as the years go on that we'd get wiser to the wiles of those things that tempt us. Former President Ronald Reagan once said, "Middle age is when you're faced with two temptations and you choose the one that will get you home by 9:00." Not all temptations are equal, of course.

This morning we begin our first Sunday in the season of Lent offering our laments for those things that tempt us in life. Now when you hear the word temptation, do you think of it as a positive or negative? Most of us think of temptations as negative—those choices we make that harm ourselves or others, right? Those choices we make after which we offer lamentations!

Throughout the Bible, there are stories of God's people being tempted in a variety of ways. Of course, one of the most familiar to those who follow the Abrahamic faiths is the story found in the very beginning of our holy texts. The story of Adam and Eve has had a huge and guiding impact on human understanding throughout the ages—a profound myth explaining why there's evil in the world. And while the interpretation of the Adam and Eve text is problematic in many ways, it does acknowledge the power of temptation in our lives and how easy it is to fall into.

A brother and sister were having their after school snack. Billie, who had already eaten his apple, suddenly said to his sister, "Let's play Adam and Eve." Pattie asked, "How do we do that?" to which he replied, "You tempt me to eat your apple and I'll give in." In just a few moments, however, mother heard Pattie scream. "Why did you strike your little sister?" mother asked Billie, to which he replied, "Well, we were playing Adam and Eve and instead of tempting me with the apple, she ate it herself."

Other stories of temptation in the Bible include the exodus people who were tempted to worship a Golden calf while Moses was away; the lust of Hophni and Phineas who guarded the ark of the covenant in Samuel; the greed of Ahab and Jezebel in I Kings and Ananias and Sapphira in the book of Acts, and the cruel injustice of Pontius Pilate who satisfied a blood lust when he murdered Galileans in Luke 13.

The biblical story mirrors the types of temptations with which we, too are tempted. A large majority of us will find something in the holy scriptures that pricks our conscience and calls us back to righteousness. The Bible is rife with wilderness stories of wandering people who succumb to temptations in their weakness.

And when we have succumbed, knowing how we've hurt ourselves or others, the part of us which feels God's broken heart laments.

We all know wilderness weakness, those places which seem to control us rather than us having control over them. Some of us know the seduction of addictions, like the lure of materialism's get-rich quick. Some of us wrestle with the misappropriation of power and control that causes us to use violence on the very ones we love and who love and depend on us.

Have you ever sunk into the abyss of self-pity and listened to the demons whisper that you are not worthy of a good job, a loving mate and family, even God's love? Have you ever laughed at a racist, sexist, heterosexist joke in order to get along, and then felt bad about it afterwards as you thought of your friend or loved on you might have just made fun of?

At some point in our life, we've all wrestled with, struggled with, lamented the temptations to which we succumbed, knowing that we've hurt ourselves or others by our actions.

Throughout Lent, including this morning, we will offer opportunities for all of us to lift our laments to God—offering our Divine Parent our regrets, our apologies, our pleas for forgiveness and mercy. On slips of paper in your

bulletins you are invited to write your laments, then after the service you can place (in the wailing wall—on the cross) There are pens on every pew row.

Of course we don't HAVE to do this—for some of us this seems kind of hokey-writing things down in worship. But we remember what Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann reminded us in my sermon last week, that it is by the naming of our laments that we are able to let them go. It is in the acknowledgment of our sin that we are able to truly work on repentance, so that we may receive the God's forgiveness.

That's why during the season of Lent we will be writing down our laments and offering them up to God.

Today's scripture invites us to reflect on our temptation lamentations, that we might receive God's mercy. Today's scripture invites us to be aware as Jesus was aware of the false rationalizations we are tempted to make when we, in our weakness, succumb to choices that are not in God's or our best interest.

For some of us, though, it feels like it takes so much strength—strength that we don't have—to resist temptation—to desist from making wrong choices. Wilderness places mean weakness, right? That's what happened to Jesus in this morning's scripture—right? He was in a weakened state in the wilderness when he was tempted.

Perhaps. Still, I'm indebted to my friends and colleague, the Rev. Linda Parker who opened up a new understanding of this very familiar text for me. In re-reading this text, Linda found a fresh Word that has given her and others hope in the midst of her temptation lamentations.

You heard it in this morning's text, but I'd like to remind you of the shorter version of the same story found in the gospel of Mark. It reads:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.

And a voice came from heaven, “you are my Son, my beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited upon him.”

Jesus’ temptation occurred in the wilderness not while he was weak, not while he was struggling with an identity crisis or emotional upheaval.

Jesus’ temptation occurred while he was at his strongest—after he had been baptized by the Holy Spirit and named and claimed as God’s Child.

The text tells us that the Spirit was the one who was with him in the wilderness—that he was not alone. And when the Evil One’s wiles were offered to Jesus, he drew upon that strength to say no.

The good news of our scripture today is that God promises us the Spirit of Strength to resist—it’s there for each of us to draw upon.

And when, in those moments of weakness we don’t believe the Spirit is there, or we ignore it (as we are tempted to do on so many occasions) and we succumb, God is still with us, offering to hear our laments as we repent.

God gives us the strength we need in what seems like the wilderness weakness of daily living. By being able to name our temptation lamentations—by offering them up to God in prayer—we are also able to draw upon a divine mighty strength to resist.

That seems to hold out across the board with folks who were asked to reflect on their temptations in a recent survey. 81% of respondents noted that temptations were more potent when they had neglected their time with God. 84% of those said that prayer time was crucial for handling those times of trial. 76% said that being God-centered helped them to avoid compromising situations; 66% said that studying the Bible was the most helpful, and 52% said

they made sure they were accountable to someone else when those tempting urges came along.

This Lenten journey of lament gives us the opportunity to reconnect with God in a deeper way so that we may draw upon the well of strength that is there for us.

Edward Markham's poem says it all

"At the heart of the cyclone, tearing the sky,
and flinging the clouds and the towers by
is a place of central calm.

So, here in the roar of mortal things,
I have a place where my spirit sings...
in the hollow of God's palm."

You place yourself there, and you will be equal to all the demands of life.

May we place ourselves in the hollow of God's palm this day and each day.