

It is easy to let ourselves kind of slip into understanding what is happening with Jesus in this story through the lenses of our own Lenten experience.

At this time of the church year, our language in worship really settles in on our need to examine our ways, repent where we have gone wrong, make amends, forgive and be forgiven. Some of us practice Lenten disciplines of withholding certain things from ourselves and then navigating the temptation to have that little piece of chocolate, that bottle of pop, that French fry from our kid's plate. It may seem an outdated discipline, and some people surely take this "giving something up for Lent" thing too far ... or not far enough. But overall, I think the Lenten practice of fasting from something can be a good and worthwhile exercise in self-control and awareness.

At our Ash Wednesday service, as we all prepared to have the symbol of our mortality traced on our foreheads, we spoke heavy words of confession.

"Most holy and merciful God," we pleaded. "We confess to you and to one another, and before the whole company of heaven, that we have sinned by our fault, by our own fault, by our own most grievous fault, in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone."

From there we went into a litany of asking for God's mercy for not loving God and neighbor with our whole hearts, for closing our ears to God's call, for our pride, envy, hypocrisy and apathy ...

... we begged for God's mercy on our self-indulgent ways and exploitation of others, our neglect of worship, prayer, human need and injustices, for our false judgments, unkind thoughts and lack of charity toward others, for our waste and pollution of God's creation.

It's a long and formidable list and so, on this First Sunday of Lent, when we get to this story typically called "The Temptation of Jesus in the Wilderness," we are already up to our elbows in our Lenten tone of repentance and forgiveness and temptation. It can be easy to superimpose our present Lenten experience on Jesus' experience in the wilderness with the devil.

What Jesus does in the wilderness, however, is not the same thing as our annual practice of dwelling on our sinful natures and remembering our dependence on God's forgiveness because ... this is Jesus. If we are to hold to our belief that the fully human Jesus maintained God's divinity and was sinless while in human form, then this story cannot be about Jesus beating temptation. And if it were, it's not properly titled ... it would have to be something more like "The Temptation of the One who Cannot be Tempted, aka Jesus."

What this is about, at least one thing that this is about, is trust – as in who or what are we going to trust? The temptations of this world? Or Jesus?

Jesus goes head-to-head with the devil here, not to prove his own sinlessness, not to show the devil that he is able to resist these temptations, but

rather to show us that while the world asks us to place our trust in what is doomed to betray us, bound to fail us in one way or another, what *Jesus* has brought to the table – what Jesus asks us to trust – can never betray us. It is ordained by God.

Locked in. Done deal.

Let's look again at the types of temptation the devil offers up. When it comes to trying to tempt the one who cannot be tempted, we can assume the devil is going to pull out the most powerful temptations it can devise, right?

So here's what that devil comes up with...

1. Cravings of the human body... hunger, thirst, comfort, distraction, exhilaration, satisfaction ...
2. The desire to be important, powerful, recognized, sought out, maybe even feared a little ... to be someone who everyone wants a selfie with, to be the top deal maker or breaker...
3. The temptation to disobey God because our faith tells us God's got our backs no matter what anyway ... it's what Dietrich Bonhoeffer might have called cheap grace. As I said just recently, God's Grace is free, but it's not cheap... it cost God everything.

In various shape-shifting ways we are asked to place our trust in these kinds of earthy things. I'm sure between the lot of us, we could come up with hundreds, probably thousands of examples. Here are some I thought of ...

... the illusion of ultimate comfort promised by that empty-calorie, overly processed food product in front of you when your body is hungry for nutrients and a nurturing meal experience.

... the false promise of making one painful feeling go away by creating another painful feeling through things like self harm or substance abuse or escaping for too many hours into the isolation of screen time.

... the exciting promises we so want to be true – promises of impressive titles, fatter pay checks and fun and exclusive creature comforts and happiness ... as long as we turn a blind eye to what often makes all that prosperity possible, like the blood and sweat of the working poor, or irresponsible and harmful use of the planet's resources.

... or how about the very easy and tempting prospect of staying quietly in the background when we see a neighbor in need? Or when we let our hearts get hardened for injustice because we're afraid to take up that cross? We rationalize: "And anyway, we can trust that God is finding ways to help the Ukrainian people and so many others at the mercy of Putin's sin. We can trust that God will take care of that person asking for money on the street. We know God is finding a way to break into the life of the kid who seems so lonely and desperate that we worry he may harm himself and others. I don't need to get involved. It's not my place, not my cross, not my responsibility. God's got it covered."

It's so tempting to stay in that insulated mindset.

So ... back to Jesus *not* being tempted by the devil in the wilderness ...

While these temptations are really of no consequence to Jesus, they are very real categories of temptation for us. So, we take time to remember each First Sunday of Lent how Jesus, through this encounter with our temptations in the wilderness, has ushered in a new way. A way that is trustworthy like only God can deliver. A promise not to betray us that only God in Jesus is capable of making.

The devil in our story is done. In my mind's eye, when I hear the end of this story, I picture the devil, shoulders slumped, walking away from our confident Redeemer, deeper into the wilderness, dehydrated and defeated. It's muttering too. "Until an opportune time," I hear it say half-way under its breath.

We'll reach that opportune time in Holy Week when Jesus dies on the cross, is laid in a tomb and descends to hell where today's battle will continue. I won't tell you how that part of the story ends yet. You'll have to come back. Bring your friends. It's a really good story.

So as we prepare to complete this walk with Jesus to the cross in this purple season, we take time to remember that the ability of our temptations to own us, to be the last word is over. We have been claimed by Jesus who says ...

We cannot live on bread alone ... or wine or other creature comforts and pleasures – we will always be hungry for more. What we *can* trust is plentiful and satisfying enough for our bodies now and forever is this meal from God we share at Jesus' supper table.

And while the world will continue to tempt us with fame and fortune and notoriety that will eventually fail us, we can completely trust that following Jesus' alternative Way of living to worship God instead of self, and serve neighbor instead of self, brings us divinely-conceived happiness and satisfaction.

And although we might be tempted to stay on the sidelines rather than serving neighbors who make us feel uncomfortable or standing up to injustices against people we really don't know, in Jesus we are urged not to test the will of God and to trust that God accompanies us on each and every step of carrying our own crosses, of risking to love this world in the ways Jesus taught us.

God does work life-giving ways despite our sin and inability, known and unknown to us, this is true ... and this is really good news for us because we are not able to be perfect vessels for God's will.

We can try though, right? And I've got to believe God would prefer to work through us, even if it's imperfectly, rather than despite us.

So, let us proclaim now, our trust in the assurance we have of God's protection as we strive to answer God's call, follow Jesus and put more and more distance between ourselves and our temptations.

We'll speak responsively the words of our Psalmist. (91:1-2, 9-16)