

“Inside Temptation”

February 14, 2016

From the Inside Out series – 1st Sunday in Lent

Jesus’ time in the wild being tempted by the devil is uncomfortable. We can gloss over it when the season of Lent comes. We can read it when Lent starts, and life goes on. But more and more, I find myself drawn to it because there’s Good News for us. There are tools for us as we face temptation, and we will.

When we witness baptism and when we reaffirm our baptism, we’re asked this question: *Will you resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?* Of course, we will! But what a challenge every day – to resist what is evil and hold fast to what is good.

Many of us are hit hard with the realization that faith doesn’t exempt us from trials and temptations. Consider two very real temptations:

1. We are so great that we don’t need to honor our Creator, and we certainly don’t need a Savior. OR
2. We are so bad that God could never forgive us.

One hope of this season is that **God will change us from the inside out** - that we will be different - by the time Easter comes. The next six weeks isn’t just about looking at ourselves, but actually allowing God to change us. Yes, there are many things outside of ourselves that we’d like to change, but how will you and I be transformed when we look at ourselves in light of God’s love in Jesus? How will this time be life-changing? What will we gain? What will we lose?

This time in the wild with the devil was the attempt to get Jesus to question who he really was. And if he questioned who he was, then he might also question his purpose on this earth. Remember he had been baptized in the Jordan and the voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased.” Now he faces this challenge before he steps into public ministry.

It’s important to name this temptation for what it is. Jesus faces the temptation to forget about God and to go another way. And imagine, Jesus has already been in this wild place for 40 days fasting and praying when the devil pulls out the big guns. “Go ahead – satisfy yourself with food and use your power to get what you want. A temptation of possession. Go ahead - take power over the world and get your own way. A temptation of power. Go ahead – show the world you’re special and get everyone’s attention.” A temptation of protection.

“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil...” We say it when we worship; how important these words are! Yet how quickly we say them without

thinking and feeling what they really mean! We're making a plea to God to help us resist temptation in all of its forms! Sam Levenson says, "Lead us not into temptation. Just tell us where it is; we'll find it."

The temptation to seek, get what we want, to be in control, and to live as though we are always protected is real. The temptation to forget God and go our own way is real. Jesus challenges us to be aware of the need we all have to grow closer to God. And to do that, we have to acknowledge that temptation is real.

Jesus' experience in the wild reminds us that we have tools to use in the face of temptation. We have the truth about God as our caring Creator and steadfast Strength. Jesus used the Scriptures that he knew and his conviction to stand against the power of temptation. We can do that, too. But how many of us stay connected to Scripture closely enough to be able to speak it? How many of us has a verse or two memorized that might be a help to us? Could we use God's Word as our prayer in a time of temptation?

How many of us would go out and speak our faith publicly? How many of us turn to God when we face temptations to serve ourselves and satisfy ourselves?

Every Ash Wednesday, I get marked with an ashen cross on my forehead as a reminder that I am mortal, that I need to repent of my sin, and that God is faithful. Someone put this way: "Lent hits us right between the eyes, brings us up short, stops us in our tracks. Lent says, 'better late than never,' and 'there's no time like the present.'"

I'm confronted by Scriptures that tell me to "rend my heart" – to literally rip it open so that God can work – and the psalmist who reminds me that God is pleased when we surrender our hearts, not our special sacrifices. We cannot simply follow "the rules" of religion. God asks us to let go of our pride and power and confess our faith in Jesus Christ.

Temptation is a reality that cannot be avoided. St. Anthony said, "Expect temptation with your last breath." Margaret Thatcher said, "You may have to fight a battle more than once to win it." Perhaps she was talking in a different context than spiritual health, but there's truth there.

Temptation is here to stay. And we fight it every day – from food we put into our mouths to shows we watch on TV to what we read to how we spend our time and money. We struggle with addiction – drugs, alcohol, food, whatever we obsess over. How we respond to temptation matters.

Lent is a time to confront temptation head-on – not so that we beat ourselves down past the point of redemption. Can we expose ourselves for who we are – sinners who need God's help for any hope of peace and spiritual health? Can we open up to receive God's help?

There's a difference between testing God and trusting God. Jesus knew the difference. To test God would be to avoid God's plan and purpose – for Jesus to bring salvation once and for all. But Jesus chose to trust God – to stare evil in the face and live with it – and then to overcome it with love.

So we begin the season of Lent with this challenge to consider the temptation to forget God. How will we use this time to return to God? To remember that we are God's people? To remember that simply labeling ourselves as "Christians" doesn't make it so? To turn to God in temptation and trust that God will give us all that we need for a blessed life?

Long ago, Lent was a period of preparation for those who would be baptized on Easter. In medieval times, it was a time for people who had committed serious sins to repent and be brought back among the congregation.

Now it seems there's a struggle to define what Lent is supposed to be. Some say it's a time in the wilderness – like Jesus' time spent there. Or is it a journey to Easter morning when we celebrate an empty tomb? Or is it a 40-day meditation to the cross where Jesus is crucified? Some talk about Lent as a time to look at ourselves. One writer suggests that Lent is like holding up a mirror to see ourselves more clearly. But I hope it's not just 40 days for us. I hope that we open our hearts for God to transform us.

However you view Lent, I pray that we could take heart in God's being with us – no matter what. Jesus' experience in the wilderness should remind us that we're never promised an easy road in faith, but we are promised something wonderful – God's presence as we live each day.

The offers Jesus encountered are hard for us to ignore. We like pleasure, power, and prestige. We like getting what we want when we want it, getting our own way, and being revered by others. We get sucked into over-indulgence. We have the option of putting God last and filling up our schedules with other things. Temptation is real and all around us, and we cannot fight it on our own strength. We need God's help to live with it and overcome it.

But the most destructive temptation we face is what Jesus faced – when we forget who we are and who God is. We fall into the temptation of thinking that our lives have no meaning or purpose. We fall into the temptation of thinking that God doesn't care. Or maybe we forget that we need God. We think we can navigate life on our own.

We forget that we are accepted because of Jesus Christ – and not because of anything we've done or not done. We are accepted and able to stand before God because of grace – not cheap grace that allows us to control God – but grace that makes

us new when we offer our whole selves to God with the confidence that God never abandons us.

Someone wrote, "Faith is faith because it does not demand God perform on cue, because it believes in God's promises, because it accepts that God's presence is always at hand, no matter what our circumstances or challenges." How can we claim our faith more boldly, especially in those moments of temptation?

Jesus who was tempted is the same one who is crucified. He's the same one who is risen from the dead and who makes new life possible for you and me - all of us - who by own strength cannot possibly overcome temptation.

Going inside temptation means that we understand something important about ourselves. It's not our own strength, but the power of Christ in us that makes it possible for us to overcome temptation.

Temptation to think more of ourselves than we should

Temptation to think less of ourselves than we should

So may we start today – even right now – claiming who we are in Jesus Christ – accepted and redeemed by grace. May we accept the freedom and power God offers us in Jesus to overcome temptation.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.