

Jesus is Tempted | Matthew 4:1-11; Roman 5:12-19 | LUMC | 2-26-2023.

Dear Church family and friends: in the last weeks we have been reviewing instructions on faithful living. We have read about God's desire to join us every step of the way, guarding us and encouraging us against yielding to temptation.

This week we enter the critical moment of decision-making: how we live in the midst of sins, how we make decisions, aware that we have a finite life on earth and need to use every bit of this limited time doing good. We're going to look at how to interpret our actions in light of the cross.

The Lenten season is about being aware of our finitude and how it affects our spiritual journey. May we acknowledge that the path for us is clearly set by Christ who first withdrew to a secure place to pray before starting his earthly ministry. Jesus needed this moment to get in touch with his moral fitness for the work ahead, a time for him to integrate both the human and divine aspects of his mission. That is why the Spirit of God led him into the desert to pray. We know Jesus lived among us and experienced what we experience, and yet He never sinned!¹ Remember that most of these external suggestions in today's readings are contrary to God's will.

This week we are considering temptations that befall us by reflecting on the temptations Jesus endured. We can define the term "temptation" in two ways: the general way and the spiritual way. According to the dictionary, the general way means the temptation is the desire to do what is wrong to fulfil a certain goal. The Bible defines temptation as anything that influences one to disobey God. In the spiritual realm, God sets the rules of living for us. Unfortunately, individuals allow themselves to be distracted on the course of following what is right. Temptation compels the individual to decide the cause of action in any given situation.

When tempted, we have two options: to decide to do the right thing, or to do the wrong thing. During the decision-making process, an individual may apply God-given will or human willpower. The two "wills" are inherent in the human psyche, and there is a very thin line between them. Within those thin lines, doubts and negative thoughts and negative emotions reside, causing an individual's confusion and frustrations. During his temptations in the risky moments of his early ministry, Jesus became our best example of doing the right thing.

Jesus' temptations involved on three areas: food, his Spirituality or identity, and human power.

Let us remember that Jesus retreated into the desert to pray, as was the tradition of his time. The divine part of Jesus was prepared to fast until his prayer and planning session was over. We can visualize Jesus engaged and focused on his prayer and mission-planning without reservation. We are told by Matthew that during that time, an urge to eat reigned supreme in the human Jesus' thoughts. It was an urge the evil spirit promoted—a desire to eat. The devil encouraged Jesus to convert stones into bread,

¹ 1 Peter 2:22; 1 John 3:5; 2 Cor 5:21

an idea Jesus could readily do if he was convinced that was necessary. Jesus resisted the proposal because he viewed it as being another lust for the flesh.

Despite Jesus acknowledging the desire but resisting, the evil spirit asks, “Do you want to live?” Jesus rejoins that one can live without bread if that bread causes one to sin. And that is especially so when it is being suggested with an evil motive. Jesus reminds us to carefully assess the motive behind what others suggest we do. We could end up fulfilling their desires that might be contrary to the Word of God. I believe Jesus refused the devil’s enticements because God had convinced him it was not a necessary thing to do. Jesus was obedient to every word that came from God, and not from elsewhere regardless of how intense his hunger was.

How do we encounter the issues of hunger? Today the food suggestion may not mean a lot to us because food is everywhere—at gas stations, grocery stores, malls, even at roadside kiosks, etc. Jesus wants us to focus on food that promotes good health, inspires Spirituality, and encourages moral and physical fitness. We need to seek God’s guidance on our selection of food and not infuse our desires for every kind of food.

The other temptation to bear in mind is about our spirituality. Jesus was being admonished to deny his connection, his divinity with God. Jesus knew to deny his identity would lead him into dangerous territory. He resisted the idea of promoting his self-will over his father’s will. He resisted and won over the temptation.

This happens to us all the time. People have encouraged me to deny my faith and follow their desires to read certain books or stay in close relationships. I have refused most of my close friends’ enticements to instead pay attention to God’s will and directions. To do this is costly. You risk being called names, being accused of doing or making decisions unilaterally, being misunderstood, or being described as rude or arrogant.

To keep my strong devotion to God in my life, I apply my experience and am inspired by the preachers and leaders in the Bible. I am reminded of Elijah running away from his pursuers who wanted to kill him because God was angry with the Israelites’ evil lifestyle, and refused to provide rain for three years. I remember Nehemiah rebuilding the Jerusalem wall and his distractors saying, “Even a fox can break in”. They tried to discredit his work and his faith in God—the very God enabling him to rebuild. Let us bear in mind that God, who promised to do good things in us, shall never stop until we succeed. Of course, the voices of decent people can win the day, but God shall never fail. Often God comes in handy unexpectedly.

A final temptation Jesus faced was the human desire for power. Where there is a power struggle, one person wins while the other one loses. During such a contest each person involved digs in deeper fearing his/her loss of willpower if the other person wins or gets their way. There is often a powerful toxic struggle between kids and parents, at our jobs and careers, and in marriages. It leaves people involved feeling frustrated, misunderstood, untrusted, and of course, unloved!

There are many options to solve the power struggle, including understanding the rules that run an organization, marriage or family life. When these rules are misunderstood, those in the power struggle may seek counsel from their seniors if on the job, seek marriage and family counseling, or go to a court of law. For Christians, scripture becomes our guide-star. Seeking God through Christ in prayer helps us understand each other's needs. Sometimes it may be a simple willingness to repent our wrongs and forge ahead. We may also seek pastoral care, and refer to our church traditions as to how issues have been solved in the past as well as calling on our own experiences.

When my husband and I sense a power struggle in our marriage, both of us choose active listening where each person presents his or her views actively being listened to, questioning, and asking for clarifications. In this assertive communication, no one intends to lose or win but to understand the issue on the table that is causing us pain. After active and assertive communication, we often succeed, but sometimes we fail to agree. When we do not agree on an issue, we agree to CONTINUE with prayers asking God to give us direction. After prayers we suspend the discussion and choose hard love. Over time we get an answer.

What do you do when you are in a power struggle either on the job, in your marriage and family, or in leadership you are involved in?

How did Jesus overcome the proposed temptations? Jesus used scripture, his deep relationship with God the Father, and his complete power to overcome his human will to allow God's will in him to win the day. Jesus was exposed to the scriptural and moral compass in his upbringing. He knew his job description; an ability to stay the course of his call assigned by his Father. He was out to do "the will of his Father in season and out of season".

Let us resist temptations. Admittedly it can be hard because the evil spirit attacks every facet of our lives. We can resist the desire for unhealthy food. We can resist selling out our spiritual identity. We can resist stealing power from whatever direction.

With Christ being our example in overcoming temptations, we can stay the course on our relationship with God and with one another. St Paul informs us that our obedience to submit to God shall usher us into righteousness. Amen.