

Matthew 4:1-11
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“Temptation”

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Jesus, after his temptation but before he begins his public Ministry, we see our savior ushered by the Holy Spirit into the Wilderness where he meets the Tempter.

Bill Watterson, author of Calvin and Hobbes once had his character Calvin ask Hobbes: “Do you believe in the devil? You know, a supreme evil being dedicated to the temptation, corruption and destruction of humankind?” And Hobbes replies, “I’m not sure humankind needs the help.”

It can be interesting to read a bible story from different translations of the bible. For our Wednesday morning bible study some participants bring their own bible and we highlight differences among the translations. One difference this week helped us understand the Tempter. The New Revised Standard Version, which is our pew bible, has the Tempter saying, “If you are the Son of God” before he issues each of the temptations. That might mean the Tempter isn’t sure if Jesus really is the Son of God. Then we read in the Common English Bible which says, “Since you are the Son of God.” This translation clarifies that the Tempter knows exactly who Jesus is and is mocking him; attempting to call forth Jesus’ gifts and graces for self-serving purposes.

A wise colleague talking about Jesus’ temptations said, ‘we often think we are tempted at our weaknesses, but often the greatest temptations we face are at our strengths.’ Not that our vulnerabilities are exempt; but we become tempted to use our gifts and talents for self-gain. For instance, the makers of Volkswagen diesel engines were so good they figured out how to program their engines to pass US emission standards, yet emit up to 40 times more pollutants than allowed by those standards, thus providing Volkswagen diesels with more power in real time driving and adding to the pollution problem. Or how about Deflategate, a National Football League controversy involving allegations the New England Patriots deliberately underinflated footballs used in the AFC Championship Game against the Indianapolis Colts in January of 2015. Here we have two top teams playing for the opportunity to go to the Superbowl and one allegedly took an unfair advantage.

We may never quarterback an NFL team or engineer automobile systems, but temptation runs strong in our veins. We may be a skilled caregiver, but become so busy caring for family we have no time or energy for others. We may gain ample resources, but become so focused on making more we end up not giving any to others. We may achieve high education, yet become so wrapped in our ego we miss the collective wisdom of people we least expect to contribute. We may be good with numbers and find ways to fudge them so we can take a little extra home. We may be a world renown preacher, and be tempted to leave our message preparation to the last minute. We may be a teacher awarded for excellence and decide that we can just wing it for our lesson that day.

In all these situations, God's powerful gift is developed overtime and practiced until it is a finely tuned talent, through this we receive a sort privilege: a special right, or advantage and if we aren't careful we can become tempted to take short cuts, or use our gift for self-serving purposes.

Some of you remember a book by Christian Pastor and Author Rick Warren titled, "The Purpose Driven Life." In a confessional moment Rick writes, "When The Purpose Driven Life went global, two things came into our lives that we never expected – a new global influence and a new financial affluence. Kay and I had to make a decision about what we would do with those resources. We decided to start reverse-tithing. We started giving away 90% of the income we were receiving and living off the other 10%, and I stopped taking a salary for my Pastoral work at Saddleback church."

He continues, "When you decide to profit from the privileges instilled by your gift, you give people a reason to question your motives. That doesn't mean Pastors can't be compensated in a generous way. It simply means that we have to check the motives of our heart as leaders to avoid any question about why we're doing what we're doing."

Lent is a Spring cleaning of the Soul. Like the Springtime urge some of us have to dust the baseboards, light fixtures and ceiling fans. The urge to touch up paint, wash windows, shake out the rugs, clean vents and change filters... the human soul requires a deep cleaning. We need to move past mere examination of our actions and look deeply at the motivations and driving forces at work in us. Lent becomes a spiritual audit of the ways we have been effected by the struggles and joys which have touched our life. Lent provides an opportunity to examine our role in relationships, account for and cleanup of the grievances which have accumulated.

Avoiding this intentional, spiritual work is unhealthy for us, and for those around us. It allows all the stuff to get a grip on our life, and control us. A few years ago our UCC Lenten theme was "Spring Cleaning." In one of the Daily Devotions UCC Pastor Anthony Robinson writes, "Mostly, in this culture, it's all about 'my way.' Who am I? What do I need? What's right for me? Will this work for me? Did I like that? That's the real superhighway. Frank Sinatra sang, 'I Did it my way.' Burger King use to invite customers; 'Have it Your Way.'" ... the 'my way' thing is probably fine in small doses. But in large quantities it's toxic. I'd say we've overdosed.

But it's not just a cultural thing. Let's be honest. It's my thing. My overdosing on my way, my agenda, my wants, my ego E.G.O which equals Edging God Out. For us in the church, Lent becomes detox time. We get reminded that 'my way' ought to come packaged with a warning: 'In large quantities this is dangerous to your health and to the health of those around you.'"

Pastor Robinson calls Lent, "our annual 40 day rehab stint..." Then he reminds us ..."detox is tough. We will get the shakes a time or two. Forty days is a long time." But if we don't do this, we won't even need a Temptor for we are fully capable of our own corruption and self-destruction..."

In the 18th century, John Wesley, one of the founders of Methodism, called his followers to gather in “class meetings.” They focused on the spiritual disciplines of prayer, support, study and accountability. At the beginning of each gathering every person was asked, “How is it with your soul? So as we begin the season of lent, gathered around this table of grace and forgiveness -- how is it with your soul? Your mind may be filled with things to do and problems to solve, your heart may be brimming with joy or breaking with sorrow. But how are you experiencing God in this time? How is your soul this day?

Amen