

“Lesson Two: Pray Steadfastly in the Face of Temptation”

First Sunday in Lent

*Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13, Luke 4:1-13
(Second in nine-part series: “Life Lessons from Luke”)*

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, March 10, 2019, First Sunday in Lent, dedicated to Gracie Glaros as she recovers from surgery and Lincoln Glaros who celebrates his birthday this week and always to the glory of God!

“Lesson Two:

Pray Steadfastly in the Face of Temptation”

*Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13, Luke 4:1-13
(Second in nine-part series: “Life Lessons from Luke”)*

On Ash Wednesday, we opened this sermon series “Life Lessons from Luke” with Lesson #1 – “Be Reconciled to God.” Today, we learn from Luke the lessons learned from Jesus facing temptation from the devil in the desert. Prayer plays a large part of this lesson as Jesus prays continuously during his 40 days of fasting in the desert. Lesson #2 – “Pray Steadfastly in the Face of Temptation.”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Jesus goes into the mountainous desert east of the sea of Galilee after his glorious baptism in the Jordan River in which God proclaims before the multitudes, *“This is my son, my beloved in whom I am well pleased.”* Jesus heads from glory to fasting all alone in the desert for the next 40 days.

Fasting in the desert is extreme spirituality. All sense of direction, self, and reality beyond self is lost and you are completely changed when you fast in a desert. It is a terrifying and edifying experience. I know this personally because I have fasted in the deserts of the middle East.

In 2010, I spent my three months on sabbatical living, worshipping, praying, building relationships and learning from Jews, Christians and Muslims in Spain, Palestine, Israel, and Egypt. As part of this journey into the three faiths of Abraham, I went through the 30 day of Ramadan with Muslims in Egypt. From sun-up to sundown on at least half the days of Ramadan in 2010 I went without water, food, anything that touched my lips. The heat during those September days would reach between 110F and 120F in the sun (it was a dry heat)— and there were no clouds for 30 days. I found myself constantly in search of

shadows, shade, air-conditioning and anything that would save me from the “noonday devil.”

On two of these days I was in the desert – one the mountainous desert of Mt. Musa or Mt. Sinai where Moses received the ten commandments and one in the Valley of the Kings, Wadi el-Muluk among the tombs of the Pharaohs including Rameses IV, when I was struck down by heat and the fast. In the high desert and the low desert, I experienced something in my fasting I have never experienced before or since. I literally “Froze” in the desert. I was climbing in one place and walking through the valley in the other when my body completely shut down. I was shaking, delirious, seeing colors and spinning as I dropped to ground from dehydration. It happened twice. I can only imagine that for Jesus this was a constant experience in his wilderness fast. It must have been hell on earth.

Once knocked to his knees, we are told by Luke that Jesus is not alone in the desert. He has a **conversational companion** – the Devil. Now, we know the Devil by many names - the Devil, Satan, the Slanderer, Beelzebub, the Adversary, the One Who Trips People Up. I will call him the Tempter.

Remember, the timing of this temptation is perfect. Jesus has not preached a sermon, cast out any demon or healed anyone who was sick. To our knowledge, he has simply been born, raised and baptized. Very few people have any knowledge of this Messiah-in-the-making.

With that... Let "The Temptation Games" begin!

First, the Tempter suggests a private temptation – a temptation to bribery. He invites the hungry Jesus to turn stones into bread. What harm could it do? He would be fed. No one would be hurt. The one who will soon help everyone with everything could take care of himself for a change. But Jesus won't be bribed. He responds, "*One does not live by bread alone.*" Unless one knows Deuteronomy 8:3 and Moses' response to the people's exodus in the desert and God's gift of manna, and the great deliverer's comment that goes on after the opening phrase, "*But by every word that comes from the mouth of God,*" the opening just hangs in the barren atmosphere. But the Tempter, who quotes scripture quite adeptly, knows this passage. For all we know, he was standing with Moses when he delivered it generations before!

Second, the Tempter rolls out a political temptation. Here is the temptation to compromise your core beliefs. Showing Jesus all the kingdoms of the world from a mind's eye view far above, he offers all these kingdoms to the kingship of Jesus. He says, *"All of this is mine and I will give it all to you. All you need to do is worship me."* Wow! Such mighty power! The Tempter is saying, *"Hey friend, it's just you and me out here - What harm would it do to achieve good for all the people of the world?"* But Jesus won't be compromised. Drawing from Deuteronomy 6:13, he responds essentially, *"God is God. Right is right. Wrong is wrong."* **Worship only God – none other.** Jesus won't compromise his values.

For the third and final temptation, the Tempter finally turns to religion – *"in the name of God do something sensational."* Taking Jesus up to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem, and (now) only quoting scripture, the Tempter challenges Jesus to throw himself off the temple, allowing the angels to save his life. Jesus is tempted to do something sensational for his people. Once again, Jesus rebukes the Tempter. He says, *"You must not test the Lord your God."* Jesus knows scripture, too. If there is going to be a battle with the Bible, I would trust Jesus to deliver the final word. Turning to

Dt. 6:16, Jesus responds that God should not be tested. God and his beloved one will not be coerced into sensationalism.

“The Temptation Games” end when the Tempter finally leaves Jesus alone. But we are told he was merely out of sight, not gone for good. He was waiting for an opportunity somewhere down the line to return to pick up the conversation all over again. Now Jesus is ready to preach, cast out demons, heal and move into prophetic mode.

No one can read these temptations of Jesus and say we have a boring faith. In the wilderness wild things happen. So many questions arise as we read this passage. For example, why is it that it seems like temptation and struggle enter into our lives right after we have had a really high moment? Something good happens and we get hit with something bad. Jesus receives the power of the Holy Spirit and immediately gets challenged by the power of the devil. Why is it we seem most vulnerable to criticism and pain when we are feeling pretty good about ourselves and our situation?

Beyond that, have you ever faced temptations of bribery, compromising your core values and sensationalism? Have you ever faced down your Tempter?

The messages are clear from the Tempter of our culture and times – *“I will give you whatever you want . . . for a certain price.”* We may not agree where the source of these is centered, but the tempters of our times are everywhere present trying to sell us “things” which may not actually be good for us.

For example, turning stones into bread may solve an immediate hunger problem, but it creates a problem of rock-gut and makes it hard to digest the next meal. I’m pretty sure passing “desert stones” is much harder than passing kidney stones! Since we are often tempted through our strengths and not our weaknesses, we get sucked into things which do not serve God’s will to promote life and health and wholeness. When we use our power for the Tempter and not for God, we get trapped into a confusion of whom we are serving and how well it will end for us.

Temptation is really like a drug and the Tempter is the drug dealer. The first time you yield to it, it can make you feel powerful. Once you have tasted this power, you want more of it. But, over time, it can drain you, make you nuts and turn you on yourself and those you love. Meanwhile, the drug dealer gets rich and keeps clear of the drugged-out state he or she has gotten you into.

This is literally true. The Sackler Family has become billionaires over the false and unnecessary marketing and then over-producing and overselling of OxyContin in the American and global marketplace thus creating the Opioid Crisis and the addiction and death of tens of thousands of people. One Sackler was quoted saying, “I wouldn’t use these drugs, they are addictive.” Like Temptation and the Tempter, Drug dealers get rich from the drug users – and they don’t care.

And what is true in this is that the worst violators of temptations’ traps are those who have no prayer life and no real relationship with God. If they have power, they believe they can do whatever they want, whenever they want to, to whomever they want. As this point, loneliness and isolation can overtake a person in this position. Without God, or a Higher Power and or a moral compass and center, things will spin out of control.

Lesson #2 centers us in prayer while we face life’s temptations. By turning our lives over to God, by trusting in a power beyond ourselves to handle the things that have been unmanageable, God gives us a chance to win the temptation games.

In our wilderness times, God is present and ready to befriend us. We discover, in the wilderness that we are never alone. In

the wilderness, we have the comfort of those who have walked the lonesome valleys before us, most significantly, Jesus the Christ.

We learn this lesson from Jesus himself. In Luke 4:1-13, Jesus is sent into the desert in the power of the Holy Spirit. While in the desert, the Spirit abides with him as his advocate, his comforter, as the one who never abandons him. In the midst of the Tempter's conversation, the Holy Spirit is constantly present to Jesus. As the temptations strip away one at a time, Jesus is cared for by the angels of mercy. Truly, Jesus is never alone. Temptation brings both challenges and friendship in the desert. Like Jesus, we are given the Holy Spirit to be with us, to comfort us, to advocate for us, to protect us in wilderness days and nights.

In your wilderness, you may freeze and you may be brought to your knees, but you will not be alone. Call it what you will, in the wilderness you can be touched by the presence of God's Spirit and God's angels? I know I have been. I felt God as I froze in the desert so many years ago. Through the years, it has been my experience that God sends friends to minister to me in my desert times. It can come as a call, a text, an email, a card, some kind of kindness come my way when I most need it and least expect it. Prayer points me to recognizing their presence and feeling God's constant help.

How often have you experienced friendship in the wilderness of your life? How often has “an angel of the Lord” appeared to you when you most needed it and least expected it? My guess is, more often than you know. Because each encounter every day is somehow touched by God. Whether we know it or not, whether we name it and claim it, God is ministering to us through others and through us to others.

As we step into Lent, let us pray steadfastly. Let us open our eyes, our hearts and our minds to the amazing friendships we have and give thanks to God for sending friends to us when we most need it and least expect it. Open and close each day with a prayer of thanksgiving and praise to God. Ask for God’s blessing. Ask God to stretch you a little further to grant and receive grace. Ask God to lay God’s hand upon you and keep you from harm. You will discover that your life is graced by God and you are given daily strength to overcome the temptations of the flesh and spirit that are thrust upon you. The wilderness brings friendship and protection if we but open ourselves to God’s power to guide us in troubled times.

“Lesson #2: Pray Steadfastly in the Face of Temptation.”
Amen.

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