

Call to Worship

We gather as the church acknowledging the desires of our hearts, and bringing the needs of our lives. **But much as we depend on God's guidance and strength, our sincere intent is to faithfully worship God with all of our heart and to learn to be what God wants, rather than what we want. We come to worship!**

The Word

Matthew 4:1-11

Common English Bible

Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him. After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was starving. The tempter came to him and said, "Since you are God's Son, command these stones to become bread."

Jesus replied, "It's written, *People won't live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God.*"

After that the devil brought him into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, "Since you are God's Son, throw yourself down; for it is written, *I will command my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone.*"

Jesus replied, "Again it's written, *Don't test the Lord your God.*"

Then the devil brought him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. He said, "I'll give you all these if you bow down and worship me."

Jesus responded, "Go away, Satan, because it's written, *You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*" The devil left him, and angels came and took care of him.

Living the Word

"The Tempter Came"

Temperatures aren't rising, but tempers are because the tempter has come! I have felt a general dissatisfaction in the air for a while, but especially since the roads started to ice over, or since snow began coming in large dumps at a time. or since the frigid temperatures and a lot of snow have made school and work an 'on again/off again' event for the last two months!

Birkie people were happy. Even so, Birkie is over...time for Spring! The temptation to be grumpy is very prevalent. As I did my grocery shopping on Tuesday, I noticed a few things: First, that not many people were around. Possibly many are tempted just to give up and stay home and warm...second, no one would smile at me, not even as I intentionally but on my best face.

No one was being polite, I was the only one in the aisles saying excuse me as I rounded a corner to meet someone face to face; I was the only one who could stop long enough to wait for the little traffic jams without a deep sigh or loud 'when will you move' look. The only comments being heard were 'What is coming next and when will this end?'

One Winter a dozen years back, about this late in the season, at the Ministerial Meeting, the priest told me that he just keeps telling himself it is Christmas and then the snow and cold don't seem as bad. I am not sure how well that will work for us all, but he has the seed to the answer. When the tempter comes, we can find the strength to resist whatever the temptation, by drawing our strength from God, through our relationship with Christ.

In nine days is the day of the year that is celebrated around the world as Mardi Gras. *Mardi Gras* is French for Fat Tuesday, referring to the practice of the last night of eating richer, fatty foods before the ritual fasting of the Lenten season, which begins on Ash Wednesday.

Popular practices include wearing masks and costumes, overturning social conventions, dancing, sports competitions, parades, etc. Similar expressions to Mardi Gras appear in other European languages sharing the Christian tradition, as it is associated with the religious requirement for confession before Lent begins.

In the United Kingdom and Ireland, the week before Ash Wednesday is called "shrove-tide", ending on Shrove Tuesday. It has its popular celebratory aspects as well. Pancakes are a traditional food. Pancakes are associated with the day preceding Lent because they were a way to use up rich foods such as eggs, milk, and sugar, before the fasting season of the 40 days of Lent. The liturgical fasting emphasized eating plainer food and refraining from food that would give pleasure: In many cultures, this means no meat, dairy, or eggs.

Bonfire of the Vanities refers to the burning of objects that are deemed to be occasions of sin. The most infamous one took place on 7 February 1497, when supporters of the Dominican priest, Savonarola collected and publicly burned thousands of objects like cosmetics, art, and books in Florence, Italy, during the Mardi Gras festival.

The focus of this destruction was nominally on objects that might tempt one to sin, including vanity items such as mirrors, cosmetics, fine dresses, playing cards, and even musical instruments. Other targets included books that were deemed to be immoral, and manuscripts of secular songs, as well as artworks, including paintings and sculpture.

Without a bonfire of your vanities, I hope we can live with and still deal with the temptations before us. How strong are you when the tempter comes? That all depends on where we draw our strength from...If we just depend on ourselves we will need to be very strong, able to identify what tempts us and deal with it all ourselves.

At first glance Jesus' temptation in the wilderness seems out of place, even contrary to accepted belief of who we think Jesus is. It is almost worth nothing that Jesus is tempted, as we know that he will not submit. Much like the inevitability of the cross, the defeat of the devil in his encounter with Jesus is inevitable. Jesus will overcome; yet this scene stands in a central place in Matthew between baptism and ministry, naming the reality of evil in the face of holiness.

Jesus is tempted by bread for his hunger. He is tempted to save himself from danger. Finally, he is tempted to take all of the power of the world that the devil can offer. Each time he rejects temptation, he sets up for us a way to understand the cross to come. Certainly, God can save God's self from death on the cross, and certainly God in Jesus can refuse temptation to sin, but in our humanity we need to see God offer sacrifice and refuse temptation in order to learn the lesson ourselves.

With some people and some temptations the strength is there. You might be tempted to do a polar plunge with the right incentive. I personally cannot think of a thing that could cause me to be tempted by that prospect. We need to really trust ourselves to depend only on us when the tempter comes. We can draw our strength from the people around us that we trust. Though most of us know that peer pressure can tempt us to give in to the tempter, if we trust the wrong people around us. Are the people you surround yourself with helping you to be strong and wise in your choices?

By building relationships that are based on love, we help each other through encouragement, wise council and support to be able to be strong enough when the tempter comes. These people may cheer us up, or commiserate with us: they may urge us on or invite us to be more patient. Better to trust them than the tempter in your mind...

The most reliable place to draw our strength against the tempter is with God. If we truly believe that God wants what is best for us, why wouldn't we go there first? Yet, often we don't slow down enough

to talk with God, and especially take time to listen to what God might say to us, rather than the voice of the tempter... Possibly you are wondering how you recognize the voice of God over the voice of The Tempter? I would suggest that we recognize the voices that we listen to the most.

There are other options, we can help The Tempter by 'giving in'. This often leads to disappointment in ourselves...never a good thing for us. Also by 'giving in' we often bring down others with us, and soon no one is smiling. When The Tempter wins we deny God's ability to save us, and then what did Christ die for? Don't be too hard on yourself, we will all still be tempted and we will all sometimes give in to the temptations.

On Ash Wednesday at noon we will share in an Ash Wednesday Service. It is to remind us that we all have failed in some way. Those who participate by opening themselves to that experience will be able to look around the room and know that we are all in this together and Christ is leading us.

I am not sure that people intend to go through life being grumpy or angry or patient and enduring, but we do have a choice how we will respond to The Tempter about our attitude, just as we have choices when we decide what to eat or who we listen to. This is especially true when there are things in our lives that we can't change or control.

Temptation comes to us in moments when we look at others and feel insecure about not having enough. Temptations come in judgments that we make about strangers and friends who make choices we do not understand. Temptation rules us, making us able to look away from those in need and to live our lives unaffected by poverty, hunger and disease.

Temptation rages in moments when we allow our temper to define our lives, or when addition to wealth, power, influence over others, vanity, or an inordinate need for control defines who we are. Temptation wins when we engage in the justification of little lies or small sins such as: a racist joke, a questionable business practice for the 'greater good,' a criticism of a spouse or partner when he or she is not around. Temptation wins when we get so caught up in the trappings of life that we lose sight of life itself. These are the faceless moments of evil, that while they seem small, lurk in the recesses of our lives and our souls.

We have to recognize the temptations in our lives to deny them. Enjoy a day of Mardi Gras if you must. Somewhere in the Bible it does say to 'eat, drink and be merry'. Then during the season of Lent look around you...what are you tempted to do? Who will you surrender to? The Tempter or Jesus?

Begin next Sunday with the Holy Meal of bread and grape that will be set before us, the meal that reminds us that God sent his Son to forgive all of the times we make the wrong choices; listen for God's encouraging, loving word to you.

Here are some of the personal words from Jesus that I read in my devotional this week; I want you to have them also: "What goes on in your mind is invisible, undetectable to other people But, I read your thoughts continually, searching for evidence of trust in me. Guard your thoughts diligently; concentrate on staying in touch with me. Good thought choices will keep you close to me."

As the pastor, I admit that I struggle with the things buzzing around in my head like a busy intersection. Sometimes our thought choices seem to come from all directions. Sometimes we do fear a crash of things within our heads.

Do you remember what they tell children if they are ever on fire? "Stop, Drop and Roll". This can also be used when our thoughts are enflamed. Stop wrestling inside, stop the thoughts and sort them out. Drop the ones that tempt you to be someone or do something that you aren't meant to be. Then roll away from the fire and into the place God has waiting for you.