

A father told his son, "Don't swim in that creek."

"OK, Dad," he answered. But that evening he came home carrying a wet bathing suit.

"Where have you been?" demanded the father?

"Swimming in the creek," answered the boy.

"Didn't I tell you not to swim there?" asked the father.

"Yes, Sir," answered the boy.

"Why did you?" the father asked.

"Well, Dad, the boy explained, "I had my bathing suit with me, and I could not resist the temptation."

"Why did you take your bathing suit with you?" the father questioned.

"So I would be prepared to swim, in case I was tempted," the boy replied.

A little later in our worship service we will pray the Prayers of the Community. Those prayers will conclude with the recording of Sarah singing the Lord's Prayer during which we ask God to "lead us not into temptation." Today, when you ask God that you not be led into temptation, what specifically will you be thinking of? What are the temptations that you wish to avoid? Are they new or are they old temptations? Are they big or are they small temptations? Are those temptations something you can talk about openly, or are they so personal they can only be entrusted to God? What are the temptations you struggle with? Be honest. You have them. We all have temptations. There is nothing more human than being tempted by something. There is nothing more human than becoming trapped by, prisoners of, our temptations.

Giving in to our temptations can sometimes impair our good judgement. Like the man who wore only a thin cotton cloth coat in winter. A storm flooded a nearby river and in the river was a bear, its head hidden and only its back exposed to view from shore. Children standing on the riverbank shouted to the man, "Look! A fur coat has fallen into the water, and you are cold. Go and fetch it!" The man, tempted by the prospect of getting a free fur coat, leapt into the river to catch it as floated past. The bear quickly attacked the man and caught him. A struggle ensued. The kids on shore, still not realizing it was a bear, shouted, "Hey mister, either grasp the coat or let it go and come out!" "I am letting the fur coat go," replied the man, "but the fur coat is not letting me go!"

As I was telling you that silly little story, did you give any thought to what sorts of temptations you have been encountering lately? Temptations, big or small, that have grasped hold of you and don't want to let go?

The Gospel reading for today, the first Sunday in Lent, is always an account of the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness where he went following his baptism to discern his vocation as the Chosen One of God, and where he encountered a series of temptations. We are told that during the forty days in the wilderness, Jesus "ate nothing at all ... and when they were over, he was famished." Fasting was understood as a way of opening oneself to receive God's guidance. But Jesus' hunger also left him vulnerable to the first temptation offered by the devil who said, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus replied, "One does not live by bread alone."

Next the devil held up the promise of authority over all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus will worship him. Jesus refused this offer of total power by saying, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." Jesus denied the lure of political and religious power since genuine power can come only from God, and only God is to be worshiped.

Finally, the devil took Jesus to Jerusalem for the most difficult test. Standing at the highest point of the temple, he suggested that if Jesus is truly the Son of God, he can throw himself down and angels will spare his life. Jesus responded with, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Jesus shows us that authentic faith is characterized by complete obedience and trust in God's promises, and not by our attempting to force God to act on them.

In each of the three temptations, Jesus is challenged to perform miraculous displays of Divine power. By refusing to do the bidding of the evil one, Jesus made an enormous sacrifice. He made himself vulnerable to human power and embarked on the path that led him eventually to death on a cross.

Luke tells us that although those three temptations were over and done with, there would be more to follow. The devil had departed, but only until there was an “opportune time” to tempt Jesus again. The temptations Jesus faced during those forty days in the wilderness were just a foretaste of the testing by evil that he would continue to encounter throughout his life.

We, too, know that life is never entirely free of temptation. The list is endless: Think of the temptations to fudge a few line items on a tax return. To gossip about another person’s life, their problems especially. The temptations to tell so-called innocent ‘white lies.’ Or to take to drinking or drugging or eating when we know these habits can dominate our life and lead to grave consequences. Or to remain silent when someone tells a racial or ethnic or sexist joke. Or to claim to be busy when family members, friends, or loved ones need us. Or to discard our personal values when they are different from society’s values. The sources of temptation are limitless. The example of how Jesus withstood temptations by placing his trust in God is intended as our encouragement to do likewise.

Lent is a 40-day period set aside each year in the Christian calendar to become more serious about inspecting what makes us tick. It is a time to examine what causes us to think, and act, and react the ways that we do. Lent is intended to help us recognize and accept how our succumbing to temptations have caused us to mess up from time to time, and to rediscover all over again the enormous relief that comes from repenting to God and learning to let go of those things, memories, attitudes, experiences, and expectations that threaten to drag us under, like the bear in the river that was mistaken for a fur coat.

A happy and cheerful man once captured a bird and placed it in a cage.

“Give me my freedom, sir!” cried the bird.

Startled that the bird was talking to him, the man listened as it said, “I am of no use to you, sir, for I have no beautiful feathers to look at; nor am I able to sing beautiful songs; and I am too small to eat. If you promise to grant me my freedom, I will tell you three wise teachings.”

The man agreed, whereupon the little bird told him: “First: do not be tempted to grieve over things that have already happened.

Second: Do not be tempted to wish for the unattainable.

Third: Do not be tempted believe in that which cannot be possible.”

“Indeed, these are wise things you have taught me,” said the man. So, he opened the door of the cage and set the little bird free.

As the man sat and pondered the bird’s sayings about resisting temptation, the bird flew up to a branch high in a tree and began to laugh. “Why do you laugh?” the man asked. “Because I so easily won my freedom,” replied the bird. “You humans pride yourselves on being the wisest of the creatures, yet I, a tiny bird, have outwitted you. Within my belly lies a diamond the size of a hen’s egg. If you had not set me free, you would be a wealthy man.”

Upon hearing this, the once happy man became angry, sad, and depressed. The more the little bird laughed, the angrier, sadder, and more depressed the man became. The man hurled abuse at the laughing bird as he attempted to recapture it. But to no avail. The little bird was always just beyond his reach.

Finally, the bird called out: “Listen to me, O human. When you granted me freedom I gave you three teachings about temptation, yet you instantly forgot them.

First, you should not grieve over things that have already happened, but you are still grieving that you gave me my freedom.

Second, you should not wish for things that you cannot obtain, and yet you want me to give up my freedom and voluntarily re-enter the cage.

And third, you should not believe that which is impossible, and yet you believe that I am carrying inside my body a diamond as large as a hen's egg, although I myself am only half the size of a hen's egg."

And with that, the bird flew away.

Another example, of how our temptations can get the better of us.

You and I will never be tempted in quite the same ways that Jesus was tempted, but every single one of us moves through our desert times of loneliness, emptiness, and temptation. That is just a fact of life.

The boy in the wet bathing suit story got it right, even if he got his response wrong. He knew that temptations of all kinds are unavoidable in life and are to be expected. The way in which we respond to our temptations becomes a clear indication of the strength of our Christian convictions and our willingness to follow Christ's lead in our lives. **Amen.**

**First Sunday in Lent**

**6 March 2022**

**Rev. Dr. Keith Fleming**