

“Focused on God’s Purpose”

“William Willimon, in his book ‘What’s Right with the Church’ (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), tells about leading a Sunday School Class that was studying the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. After careful study and explanation of each of the three temptations, Dr. Willimon asked, **‘How are we tempted today?’** A young salesman was the first to speak. ‘Temptation is when your boss calls you in, as mine did yesterday, and says, ‘I’m going to give you a real opportunity. I’m going to give you a bigger sales territory. We believe that you are going places, young man.’

‘But I don’t want a bigger sales territory,’ the young salesman told his boss. ‘I’m already away from home four nights a week. It wouldn’t be fair to my wife and daughter.’

‘Look,’ his boss replied, ‘we’re asking you to do this for your wife and daughter. Don’t you want to be a good father? It takes money to support a family these days. Sure, your little girl doesn’t take much money now, but think of the future. Think of her future. I’m only asking you to do this for them,’ the boss said.

The young man told the class, ‘Now, that’s temptation.’”

After retelling that story, King Duncan of Sermons.com shares, **“Jesus overcame his first temptation by putting his complete trust in God. That’s a good example for us.”** (William Willimon, adapted by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com)

As we examine the Temptation of Jesus, let’s consider how Jesus’ responses demonstrate **his focus was on God’s Purpose – the Will of God**. Let’s also think about our own confrontations with temptation and whether or not following Jesus’ example is an appropriate reaction to such experiences. So, listen again to the first two verses from today’s Gospel Lectionary Reading, **“Then the Spirit led Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the Devil. After spending forty days and nights without food, Jesus was hungry.”** Anyone would certainly be hungry after living without food for 40 days! Unlike many of our temptation encounters, Jesus did not make bad decisions, which led to finding himself being tempted. So, the report in our Reading reveals Jesus underwent the forty days and those temptations in accordance with **God’s Purpose – God’s Will – Led by the Holy Spirit**.

Rev. Fred B. Craddock discussed this aspect, saying, “Notice: Jesus is not tempted because he has departed from God’s will. Jesus is in the desert because he was led by the spirit. Take a poll among the churches: it’s usually the obedient and not the disobedient who are struggling, being opposed and tested. The disobedient seem to have a knack for locating the cushions. ...”

Craddock continues, “He did not use the power of the spirit to claim exemption or to avoid the painful difficulties of the path of service. He did not use God to claim something for himself. And it was this serving, suffering, dying Jesus whom God vindicated by raising him from the dead.” Craddock concludes, **“A church too fond of power, place and claims would do well to walk in his steps.”** (“Testing That Never Ceases” by Rev. Fred B. Craddock)

Rev. Dr. Janet H. Hunt also helps us get to the heart of what is most important about Jesus’ Temptation, by stating, “I wonder sometimes if the most challenging part for Jesus in the wilderness was not the tests that came at the end. I wonder if the hard part was those forty days which came before. Indeed, I wonder how it was at day seventeen when not a whole lot was happening yet – at least not in a way that would have been visible to anyone else – and there was still no end in sight. That time when it must have seemed as though God was so very far away.”

Hunt confesses, “For I’ve had those times. I expect you have as well. Such wilderness times come for us, usually unexpected and surely unbidden. It has always been so. Indeed, you and I have the gift of the entire Biblical witness recounting these times in the wilderness for others of God’s people. ...”

Hunt continues to explain, “To be sure, in my own wilderness times, it helps to sit still in stories like these – both those mentioned here and those in my own life or in the lives of others I have known – which offer endings **marked by meaning and purpose, reconciliation and hope**. I wonder if Jesus also clung to these stories passed down to him in addition to so many others like them during day nine, and day seventeen, and day twenty-nine in his wilderness. I wonder if that is not what partly sharpened his clarity, what deepened his strength, what enhanced his resolve when the devil offered to satiate Jesus’ hunger with bread and with power and with glory.” Hunt concludes, **“I wonder if that’s what gave Jesus what he needed so that he could rely instead on those eternal gifts of God which were meant for him and for us all.”** (“Gifts for the Wilderness” by Rev. Dr. Janet H. Hunt on dancingwiththeword.com)

An example of what Dr. Hunt was saying is found in Jesus’ response to the first temptation, **“But Jesus answered, ‘The Scripture says, ‘Human beings cannot live on bread alone, but need every word that God speaks.’”** Jesus could have used his miraculous power to provide himself bread or any other food he might have desired! He allowed **God’s Purpose – the Will of God** to bring him to his hunger, so he would reveal to the Divine Parent, himself, and everyone else **the ultimate source of meaning and fulfillment is God’s Purpose**.

Brett Younger provides humorous insight into Jesus’ temptation to miraculously satisfy his hunger, by describing “the very first Calvin and Hobbes comic strip”. Calvin is a 6 year old boy and Hobbes is his stuffed tiger friend. Younger explains, “Calvin’s dad is working on the car, when Calvin walks up in a safari hat and says, ‘So long, Pop! I’m off to check my tiger trap! I rigged a tuna fish sandwich yesterday, so I’m sure to have a tiger by now!’ His dad replies, ‘They like tuna fish, huh?’ As Calvin walks off, he says,

‘Tigers will do anything for a tuna fish sandwich!’ The final frame shows Hobbes (Calvin’s stuffed tiger friend), hanging by his foot from a tree, munching on a tuna fish sandwich. He says to no one in particular, **‘We’re kind of stupid that way.’**”

Younger sums up our temptation struggles, saying, “Every day we are tempted to be less than we can be. Without giving it much thought, we choose what’s easiest.” Younger concludes, **“We seldom consider how much more is possible. We take tuna fish when we could do better.”** (Brett Younger, Disabling Temptations)

Jesus’ response to the second temptation makes his **focus on God’s Purpose** even more pronounced. **“Jesus answered, ‘But the Scripture also says, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”** When you or I undergo temptations, it is not a test about God’s faithfulness or truthfulness – it is a test, if there is one, of our personal commitment to live as we have claimed – in accordance with **God’s Purpose**.

Rev. William Loader reveals the same insight, writing, “Ultimately the focus is what it is in Matthew: doing the will of God alone and saying no to other gods. But doing the will of God needs unpacking: what is **God’s will**? What is God about?” Loader asks, **“What then am I about?”** Loader explains, “There are plenty of spiritualities, including within Christianity. Which is the way to go? Concluding, Loader says, “This calls for critical, theological reflection, because ultimately it depends on **who and what we understand God to be**. Within Christianity we find all the options, including those attributed in the passage to the devil. - and more!” (First Thoughts on Year A Gospel Passages from the Lectionary, Lent 1 by William Loader)

Jesus revealed even more clearly **his focus was and is on God’s Purpose** when he answered the third temptation and put an end to the confrontation, saying, **“Go away, Satan! The Scripture says, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only Him!’”**

How are you and I going to respond to our examination of the Temptation of Jesus? **Where will you and I put our focus in our own encounters or confrontations with temptation?** What do we take away from the revelation in today’s Scripture?

Sarah Dylan Breuer blogs her insight from the Reading, writing, “So I thank God that Jesus is not the ‘God said it. I believe it. That settles it!’ type. I thank God that Jesus does not believe that every word of scripture is equally applicable to his circumstances. Jesus will not accept just any word from scripture as God’s word to him at that moment.” Breuer explains, **“For Jesus, it’s not just about God’s truth; it’s also about God’s time, God’s call, and most of all about God’s love.”**

Breuer testifies, “Jesus is Lord, beloved of God, but the kind of authority Jesus exercises, the character of the God who calls Jesus God’s Son, and the means through which the world will be gathered for the messianic feast **are revealed most fully through Jesus’ self-giving love and forgiveness**”. Breuer concludes, “Having resisted the temptation to use God’s power and God’s gifts to further his own privilege, **Jesus is prepared to proclaim with his whole life the kind of self-giving love, radical openness, and unconditional forgiveness that is the character of the God of Israel.**” (SarahLaughed.net blog by Sarah Dylan Breuer)

Mickey Anders reminds us of the temptations and challenges, we face as we live our everyday lives through sharing the following story, “He had finally got his chance to make the Really Big Sale. He was going into the final interview on the biggest contract he had ever written. As he was ushered into the office of the executive buyer, an assistant brought coffee and left. The atmosphere was cordial, and he knew he was giving his best presentation ever.

Then the assistant tapped on the door, re-entered the office and spoke briefly with the executive. She stood and said, ‘I apologize, but I have to tend to a matter. I’ll just be a minute or two.’ She followed her assistant out of the room.

The sales representative looked around the beautifully appointed office. He saw family pictures on her desk. Then he noticed a contract on her desk. She had evidently been studying a bid from a competitor. Leaning forward, he could see the column of figures, but it was obscured by a diet soda can.

He was tempted to move the can and see the bottom line of his competitor’s bid. What harm possibly could there be in reading her private information? After all, she had left it out in plain sight, almost. After wrestling with himself a while, he finally decided to take a peek.

As he lifted the soda can, he discovered the can wasn’t filled with soda at all. Instead it was a bottomless can filled with 1,000 BBs which gushed out, and ran all over the desk and cascaded onto the carpet. His attempt to short-cut the competition was exposed.”

After telling this story, Anders concludes, **“Not every temptation is so obvious. Not every failure is so embarrassing. Still, every temptation is a challenge.”** (Mickey Anders, *Six Flags Over Jesus*)

During his forty days and nights of Temptation, **Jesus put his focus** not on himself – not on his needs or wants but on **God’s Purpose – God’s Will!** Jesus did not just put his focus on God’s Purpose during his Temptation but throughout his public ministry, sufferings, death, and resurrection! Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is **your and my example** of how we are to face temptations and to live our everyday lives. During this Church Liturgical Season of Lent and up to and including our Easter Celebration, let us respond to **Jesus and his example** by keeping him and his focus foremost in our thoughts and prayers. Let’s not fall for the temptations, which trap us, let’s not give up who we can be for mere tuna fish. **Instead, follow the New Life in Jesus Christ – put your focus on God’s Purpose – embody God’s Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love, Forgiveness, and Welcome!** Amen.