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1 Lent C: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13
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St. John's Episcopal Church, Wichita, KS

Temptation: the state of being enticed to commit an unwise or immoral act. The risk of provoking an unwanted consequence.

Temptation is all around us, something we are warned against, and, of course, has been part of our story from the beginning, since Adam and Eve and the apple, the knowledge of good and evil.

But it is not always as blatant as this. Throughout Scripture, temptation haunts us, sometimes in the strangest of places. Like in the book of Genesis, when Abraham finally receives his long awaited son, Isaac, and then God asks him to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. The Scripture refers to God *testing* Abraham, but some translations tell us that God TEMPTED Abraham when asking this, tempted him to recoil from his faith in fear and anger.

And in Exodus, as the Israelites are wandering for 40 years in the desert, and they complain bitterly to God about the lack of food and water, and they wish to go back to their comfortable beds, even in slavery, here a similar choice in translation is offered – that in this they either tested or tempted God, presumably trying God's patience with listening to their troubles as God proceeds to save them.

And at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, as we read in our Gospel story today, at the beginning of Lent, Jesus himself is tempted by the devil. But he also warns back, 'not to put your Lord God to the test,' which can also translated as 'do not *tempt* the Lord.'

Jesus also cautions his disciples, at the Mount of Olives, just before his arrest: 'pray that you may not come into the time of trial', alternatively translated: 'pray that you do not come into temptation.' This is just before Jesus himself prays that the cup he is given might be taken away from him.

Which reminds us, of course, of the prayer Jesus taught us, which we still faithfully say today, which includes the words: 'lead us not into temptation.' So throughout our history with God, even until today, we pray against temptation – against tempting God, and against God tempting us.

But what do we really mean when we ask this?

I once took an informal poll, selecting people from the population of those who say the Lord's prayer at least weekly, to find out what we think we are asking when we say the words – 'lead us not into temptation.' Every single person I questioned replied that we are asking God to keep us from either sexual or dietary transgressions. A few added that we are asking to be kept safe from unkind words or thoughts about our neighbors.

In general, that we pray to be protected from making mistakes in behavior. And this is reasonable enough.

But why then, would Jesus be tempted? And why would GOD tempt us?

These are particularly timely questions as we begin our season of Lent, and we are encouraged to take up a renewed spiritual discipline, and also to deny ourselves certain physical comforts as we keep in mind our repentance and our sinfulness in preparing for Easter these 40 days. And because of this, the concept of temptation may be more on our minds.

We may be tempted to eat dessert until we remember that we have given up sweets, or tempted to go to bed early until we remember that we promised ourselves and God that we would spend time in prayer each evening.

And where does this temptation lead US?

What if we don't even really try to keep up a Lenten routine, to test our own discipline? And if we slip up, will anyone ever find out? Well, I am tempted to say that's probably what Eve thought, too, but I don't want to get overly dramatic.

And yet... one of the curious things about the temptation of Jesus is that at first, it doesn't seem like that big a deal to me. Surely, if he is the son of God he has the strength to resist the devil. And even as a fully human being, I think to myself that if the devil offered me all the riches in the world if only I would worship him, that would not even seem like too much of a deal.

And yet the Bible tells us that Jesus WAS tempted, here, and even more mightily, when he prays to have his course altered, when he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane that he might be spared the death in store for him.

And not just to be spared the physical pain, I think.

In the movie 'the Last Temptation of Christ,' as much negative publicity as it garnered for showing Jesus having a relationship with Mary Magdalene, the real temptation Jesus faced was not actually sexual. In a very powerful way, this film portrayed the deepest temptation, the last and most powerful of all, was for Jesus the temptation to lead a normal life, the temptation to be fully human and NOT fully God.

That he was MOST tempted NOT by his unlimited power, the power that he could have easily unleashed in our Gospel story today, using it for his own benefit, but rather by the knowledge that he could settle down with a family and live a pretty simple life as a carpenter, and die a pretty simple death. That he could be removed from bearing the responsibility that comes with his particular life on earth.

And THIS is the kind of temptation, in our own way, that we live with, and that we are especially aware of in Lent. This is something, as humans, that we DO share with Jesus, and the kind of temptation we DO ask to be delivered from: the temptation to think that what we do doesn't matter.

The temptation to think that WE don't matter, not only our actions but our thoughts and beliefs. Not that if we fail at whatever task we set before us, we will be found out and punished, but that WE will suffer, and the WORLD will suffer, if we allow ourselves to abandon our faith – our faith in ourselves, and most importantly, our faith in God.

And this is the temptation also faced by Adam and Eve, by Abraham, the Israelites, and very seriously by Jesus - it is not really the temptation to something material, not even to great power, it is the temptation, in the end, to believe the lies of the devil.

To believe, above all else, that we are limited by our own horizons – our fear, and our death. Because, when you think about it, those lies are the same old boring path we have already traveled.

We KNOW what happens when Eve eats the apple, and not just because we have already read the ending. We KNOW what happens when someone has an affair, or even another slice of cake when they are dieting; we know all about guilt, about unintended consequences, about ALMOST getting where we are going before it all goes awry.

We know what it is to live in the limited world of what we are capable of alone.

But God wants us to know something else.

God wants us to know freedom, wants us to know the great, untraveled territory of our lives that happens when we resist the temptation to believe that our life is small and predictable.

Jesus resists temptation not to avoid punishment or retribution, but to move beyond his earthly fears and desires, and into a place where he can truly be free, and where ultimately he frees the world. And in this salvation he frees US to believe that the temptations we face, the ones that lure us away from faith – in ourselves, in others, in God, are nothing compared to what happens when we choose to follow him instead. That we are free in ways that we have yet to even understand.

And we see evidence of this throughout the history of our relationship with God: despite Abraham's fear, he does as God asks with Isaac, and he is delivered from harm to his son and rewarded for his faith, and ultimately he becomes the father of a great nation. Despite their complaining, the Israelites do not give up on God, and they are brought to their promised land. Despite Jesus' own reservations, he goes through with the path laid out for him, and he goes on to resurrection. And even his disciples, in their fear and confusion following Jesus' death, as tempted as they are to run and hide, instead end up spreading the good news to all of the nations.

And so we return to ourselves.

This Lent, we each have a path of our own to follow: the challenge to see where we are tempted to give up our faith, where we are tempted to take the easy path, the one where we know the ending, rather than the far scarier one that may lead us beyond where we can even see.

To take up our own cross, but to be led closer to God as we bear the weight of our fear and pain while still believing in resurrection.

In our Eucharistic prayer for this season, we ask God to help us in this: we pray, “deliver us from the presumption of coming to this table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal.” And we recognize in this both the comfort and the challenge of calling ourselves Christians.

It is not always easy to believe that the path of faith will lead us farther than the path of fear. But I am tempted to tell you that it could change the entire world.