
Temptation
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
March 1, 2020
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11

Welcome to the first Sunday in Lent! Our lenten journey officially began on Ash Wednesday, but the first Sunday in Lent always feels like the official kick-off. And as usual, the lectionary gives us texts that open the door to a discussion on temptation.

But what - exactly - does “temptation” mean? On a basic level, temptation is simply a desire to do something, perhaps even something good. But usually, we hear the word with a lot of negative moral overtones. For example, one dictionary defines temptation as “a desire to do something, especially something wrong or unwise.” Another dictionary says, “temptation is a fundamental desire to engage in short-term urges for enjoyment, that threatens long-term goals.”

I think that in our society, the idea of “temptation” is much more confusing than it really needs to be. And we happily put up with that confusion because - let’s be honest - we like to be tempted. If we didn’t we would not struggle with it so much. Whether we give in or resist, we enjoy being tempted. That’s human nature. Which is why you can see some great bumper stickers like, “Opportunity may only knock once, but temptation leans on the doorbell”. Or, “Lead me not into temptation - I can find it all by myself”.

If you don’t agree that we like to be tempted, consider a “simple” temptation, like sleeping in. I think it’s pretty common for most people that if we are still asleep when our alarm clock goes off, we are tempted to just roll over and go back to sleep. That human trait is so common that most alarm clocks have a “snooze” feature to satisfy that temptation. It’s a great idea - unless you get into a pattern where you just hit snooze over and over until you are late for work. Be honest. If we wanted to actually get out of bed, we would not even use the snooze feature. That fact that modern clocks have a snooze feature is a testament to this aspect of human nature.

Incidentally, if you struggle with the snooze syndrome, I read about 2 new alarm clocks you might want to try.

“Clocky” is an alarm clock on wheels. When the alarm goes off, the clock drives off in random directions, forcing you to chase it around your bedroom and catch it before you can turn it off, by which time you will be wide awake. Another model, called “SnuzNLuz” is even more diabolical. The clock is connected to your bank account. Every time you hit the snooze button, you automatically donate money to a charity that you hate. All of this instead of just resisting the temptation to use the snooze feature on your clock.

Our society does seem conflicted on temptation. Temptation is focused on something we should not want, and yet we want to be tempted. Perhaps that’s why stories about temptation appear in the Bible. We read two classic temptation stories this morning.

In Genesis, we have the story of temptation in the garden of Eden. It’s a real classic. So much so that if you search online for “temptation”, about half the images you find show an apple and a snake together. The other half of the images show an apple and chocolate - or some other tasty food. Regrettably, most of the images you find include women, not men, because of a particular reading of the Genesis story that predominantly blames women for temptation. That negative association between women and temptation has created many social problems over the years, but that’s another story.

I’m glad we just read the actual story right now though - because I hope you got one or two surprises. For example, I hope you noticed that the fruit in question was not an apple. It was simply the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Of more interest to me is the fact that in this mythical story, the “God” person in the story lies to the man and woman, while the snake tells the truth. The snake exhibits higher moral character than the “god” character, which is interesting. But perhaps the most interesting feature of this story is that the great temptation is about making a decision and choosing how to live. It is about choosing between 2 clear options. One option is to be engaged fully in real life which includes grappling with the many complexities and ambiguities we need to navigate as we consider the nature of good and evil. The other option is to live in an environment where everything is controlled and managed for us - where we do not personally need to struggle with making decisions about good and evil - essentially a daycare. And the decision that the man and woman make - to leave the daycare - is the

same decision that I would make myself. We would rather live with the very real struggle for the knowledge of good and evil than remain child-like our whole lives. And yet we have been raised to believe that the man and the woman made a big mistake when in fact they chose the only option that makes any sense.

The idea that the man and woman made a big mistake drives a theological position called “Fall Theology”, where good and evil are presented as simple, distinguishable concepts. Traditional Christianity affirms this position, declaring that if we just had enough faith, we could avoid evil and do good. This idea comes - in part - from the Judeo-Christian idea of the dichotomy of good and evil. The idea that good and evil are separate and opposite. The idea that everybody deserves either heaven or hell and moreover, that it’s easy to tell the difference.

Traditional Christianity completely ignores the reality that good and evil are actually mixed together in real life, and that the human condition requires that we join the conversation about the nature of good and evil ourselves. To me, the Genesis story speaks directly to the very human need to be tempted. We need temptation because we need to grapple with good and evil ourselves. If you are still not convinced, let me ask you this - Without temptation, how would we know if we were doing ok or not as we navigate good and evil in our own lives? If we were placed into a world without any temptation, there would be no evil, but there would also be no good. We need temptation to help us gauge how we are doing our own journey in life.

Our need to face temptation does not mean that the journey is easy or without risk. Many people, including many clergy, were devastated with the recent news that Jean Vanier, a spiritual champion particularly for people with disabilities “had sexually abused six women over a period of several decades [in a way that was] ... coercive and done ‘under conditions of psychological hold’.”¹ Vanier was well-known for his sense of spirituality that included meeting the divine in all people, especially people with physical and psychological disabilities. He worked and lived among people society considers the least of the least. He was a hero for many people. And yet, even in him, it came to light

¹ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-jean-vanier-was-revered-but-revelations-of-abuse-and-manipulation/>

that good and evil were mixed in his heart.

We ourselves cannot fully understand the nature of our own hearts unless we deal with temptation ourselves. That is simply part of the human condition. But we can also use temptation as a tool, to help each of us figure out what it is that drives our own behaviour. Acknowledging our own temptations is the first step towards controlling them. If we were never tempted, we would not know who we are.

This human need to face temptation is not a new thing at all. Consider from ancient Greek history Homer's *Odyssey*. In part of that story, Ulysses is returning home from the Trojan wars. Ulysses was warned about "Sirens" on his journey. The Sirens were 2 monsters living on an island, who pretended to be beautiful women with alluring voices. It was said that if sailors heard these voices, they would be seduced towards the island, their ships would crash into the rocks, and all would perish. However, Ulysses decides he wants to hear the Sirens singing - without dying of course. So Ulysses instructs his sailors to tie him to the mast of his ship and to block their own ears with wax. That way, the ship can travel past the island safely. The sailors don't hear the singing so they don't steer into the rocks, and Ulysses can hear the singing but come to no danger because he is tied to the mast of the ship and can't react.

On the one hand, the trick works. On the other hand, the solution is more complicated than that alarm clock on wheels. Ulysses could have simply avoided the island altogether. But Ulysses wanted to hear the alluring voices. **Do you agree me with me yet that we want to be tempted?** The story of Ulysses and the Sirens and the Garden of Eden story in the Bible are both adaptations from the "Epic of Gilgamesh" which originated in Mesopotamia around 2100 BC. That poem is very likely the oldest surviving great work of literature. The human struggle with temptation is a very old struggle indeed because it is part of the human condition. It is completely natural that we struggle with temptation today.

Which brings us to the story we read today of Jesus spending time alone in the wilderness and facing his own temptations. In the story, Jesus was tempted by the devil himself. And because we get to hear the dialog, we get to hear what it was that tempted Jesus, and we get to hear Jesus's resolve in every case. What exactly was Jesus tempted

by? In summary, he was tempted to accept a ministry that was not his ministry. The temptation to turn rocks into bread was the temptation to feed people. The temptation to call the angels was the temptation to become a miracle worker. The temptation to rule the world was the temptation to amass power, wealth and glory. But Jesus does not give in to those temptations. Those things are not his ministry.

This temptation was amplified in the 1988 movie “The Last Temptation of Christ”, where Jesus is also tempted at the very end of this ministry. Near the end of the movie Jesus is hanging on the cross. He is dying. And in the midst of all the noise and confusion, a young girl appears and tells Jesus that she is an angel sent to rescue Jesus. The girl says that God is pleased with everything that Jesus has already done and that his mission is now over. She says that Jesus does not have to die on the cross. Jesus is invited to come down from the cross and lead a normal life. Jesus accepts this and comes down from the cross. The crowd, meanwhile, still sees Jesus’s body hanging on the cross. Jesus continues his life like a normal person, he gets married, has children, he continues to work as a carpenter. But when Jesus is old and near death, Judas comes to Jesus and tells him that the girl Jesus thought was an angel was in fact the devil, and that Jesus wrongly choose the temptation of normal life, rather than his real mission, which included dying on the cross to bring about the salvation of all people. And so the aged Jesus crawls back to the cross, says, “it is finished”, and dies on the cross. The “last” temptation for Jesus was the choice between a normal life of comfort, and Jesus’s actual ministry.

Perhaps I’m still excited from our Annual Meeting last week, but it seems to me that we as a congregation face the same temptation. We - like Jesus - get to choose between a normal life, and our mission. Normal life means that we want things to stay as they are. Normal life means that we want to keep doing the things we have done, as we have always done them. But our mission as a church includes embracing and adapting to our community. Our community is changing, and we have to change too if we want to be keep being relevant to our community. We - like Jesus - are constantly tempted to choose - to live in the past, or to move into our future. Where are you tempted to live?

Amen.