

Wesley United Methodist Church

March 9, 2014

“What’s for Dinner? Roast Duck.”

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

A few years back Lari White sang a country song that went like this, “Lead me not into temptation, I already know the road too well; lead me not into temptation/I can find it all by myself.” It’s a chorus that may make us chuckle, but after a few moments of reflection, we understand that this is a sobering statement of the human heart. “Lead me not into temptation/I can find it all by myself.”

A certain man was visiting his psychiatrist. Among the many questions the doctor asked was, “Are you bothered by improper thoughts?” “Not at all,” the man said. “The truth is I rather enjoy them.” And we do enjoy them until they get us in trouble.

Temptation. It follows us to the workplace, to the office, to school, to the cafeteria, it forces us to say no to some of our most basic desires. It is as old as humanity. We can read about it in the second chapter of Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7.

The Lord took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, “You must not eat from any tree in the garden?” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, “You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.”

“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. We all know the story, and we all know the power of temptation. Even Jesus struggled with the tempter. Matthew 4:1-11 writes:

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written: “He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone,”

Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”

Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’” Then the devil left him, and the angels and attended him...

To be a human being is to be tempted to anger, tempted to lust, tempted to sloth, tempted to stubbornness, tempted to vengeance, and the list goes on and on. How do you say no to the tempter?

How can we learn to control our most basic impulses and desires? It is tough. For one thing, the tempter hits us where we are most vulnerable. That is to say, your temptation may not be mine, and vice versa.

A writer named Susan Nielson wrote a wonderful column about temptation sometime back. Her temptation is materialism. She writes how she envied a neighbor’s pool. She said it opened her mind to the idea of disposable income, “of buying things you don’t need and your neighbor’s can’t afford.” She

said, "It was like meeting the devil himself in a swimsuit and a smile." She adds, "I've been running from the devil ever since." After college she worked on luxury yachts for a while and she adds, "The devil worked beside me as a deck hand...some of the yacht owners flew in private jets. Others merely flew first class." Later she moved to Oregon, bought a house and spent a solid year gloating about owning a washer and dryer. The ability to do laundry at any hour...was a significant improvement in her quality of life. "Then," she writes, "the devil stopped by with a welcome basket and a little gossip. The neighbors have central air, he said. The people down the street have a landscaper. The couple across the way buy gourmet cheese...for \$12 a pound. They also use doggie day care, their bathroom is tiled and their wine collection is amazing." She said, "I almost cried myself to sleep on the futon couch."

She says this about the tempter, "He loves selling the American dream as a scarce commodity. He loves hinting if I don't try harder to be rich, I'll end up poor. This is why we have the same conversation now as we did 25 years ago, next to the swimming pool of a girl whose face I barely remember. I tell him I'm blessed with everything I need. He laughs and says, in a voice as old as money, that's not enough."

For many people, it is not enough. There is constantly that voice, "More...more." All of us have a point where we are vulnerable to temptation. Some of us are weak at one point; others are weak at another.

The tempter always hits us where we are most vulnerable. He came to Jesus when he had been fasting for forty days and offered him bread. He came to him when he was pondering his mission of sacrificial service. Satan offered Jesus shortcuts: "Throw yourself from the pinnacle of the temple and let the angels catch you. That'll catch their attention. It's a lot easier than hanging on a cross. Bow down to me. Let me give you the kingdoms of the world. That's a lot quicker than working generation after generation through your fickle disciples and those folks who will follow them to build your kingdom." The tempter always approaches us where we are most vulnerable.

But Jesus didn't give in. And neither should we. What can we learn about dealing with temptation from Jesus' experience in the wilderness? Let me suggest some ways.

First of all, know the Scripture. It's interesting, don't you think, that one of the things the tempter did in dealing with Jesus was to quote scripture to him? Of course, he took the scripture out of context, and Jesus knew that because Jesus was grounded in the Hebrew Scripture. That's important.

We're told that farmers in Minnesota used to hear advertisements on the radio for "Babcock B 300's." What were Babcock B 300's? Glad you asked. Babcock B 300's were a special breed of chickens that were supposed to lay more eggs than any other kind. But what was really interesting was the fellow who developed them. His name was Monroe C. Babcock, and he had this theory: he believed that chickens would produce better if the farmers read their Bibles more and went to church more often. He believed that people who knew the love of God would be more loving and kind to others around them, even to the animals on their farms. And chicken that were treated kindly would produce more eggs! Now I don't want to speculate on the effect of reading the Bible and that producing more eggs. And I am not sure if any research has been done. But the rest of Babcock's beliefs are right on: People who read the Bible and go to church more often, those who know the love of God surely will be more loving and kind to others even to the animals on their farms.

We also need to stay connected to our Christian friends. We are always more vulnerable to temptation when we're alone. The tempter came to Jesus when he was alone in the wilderness. The tempter came to Peter when he was alone beside the fire in the Temple courtyard, the tempter came to Judas when he was away from the other disciples. When we drift away from our Christian friends and worship we are in danger of temptation. How do you stop the tempter? Know the Scriptures, stay near Christian friends. And stay as far away from any compromising situations as you can.

"Lead me not into temptation..." If we give the tempter the least bit of room in our lives, resisting becomes all that much more difficult.

The story is told of a certain African tribe that learned an easy way to capture ducks in a river. The tribesmen learned to go upstream, place a pumpkin in the river, and let it slowly float down into the

flock of ducks. At first, the cautious fowl would quack and fly away. After all, it wasn't ordinary for pumpkins to float down the river! But the persistent tribesmen would float another pumpkin into the re-gathered ducks. Again they would scatter, only to return after the strange thing had passed. Again, the hungry hunter would float another pumpkin. This time the ducks would become more comfortable, the pumpkins floated until they finally accepted the pumpkins as a normal part of life.

When the natives saw that the pumpkins no longer bothered the ducks, they hollowed out the pumpkins, put them on their heads, and walked into the river. Meandering into the midst of the tolerant fowl, they pulled them down one at a time. Dinner? Roast Duck!!

This is how the tempter works. He normally doesn't attack us head on. It begins with small compromises. A few dollars out of the till. Not enough to notice, at first. A wink, a smile, a phone call. And before long we are roast duck. How do you deal with temptation? Know the Scriptures. Be faithful in worship and in church fellowship opportunities. Stay as far away as possible from temptation. And pray, "Lead me not into temptation, but deliver me from evil...Amen"