

St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Keller, Texas

Sermon for The First Sunday in Lent ~ February 21, 2021

The Very Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

One reason we observe Lent is to remind us that God's grace is not cheap. We see in this forty-day period what it cost God to make grace available to us. We focus on the humanity of Jesus in a way we do not in other seasons because we must be reminded that the One we worship became as we are so that we might become as he is.

I recall the story of man who wanted to learn what it was like to be a homeless man. Just in case he ran into problems, he thought it would be a good idea to pin a \$100 bill on the inside of his jacket. Eventually, one of the homeless men saw the \$100 and told the others. They rejected him because anybody who could go around with a \$100 bill in his jacket was not one of them. He was living a masquerade. He was not authentic.

The story illustrates what we have often done to Jesus. We've pictured him in such a way that he has divinity sewn inside his coat so that he is not really up against the temptations, trials, and troubles we face. In this view, he may have *seemed* to live our way of life but he was not *really* one of us. When the chips were down, he had resources we do not have. This view of Jesus is not new. In fact, it was a view that started among the Gnostics and others shortly after his death and resurrection. But it is not the Jesus the gospels portray. The gospels tell us that Jesus was in fact tempted as we are. Our faith in Jesus is not supposed to protect us from the problems of life, or insure that we will be able to keep our power or wisdom or riches. On the contrary, our faith in him compels to bear our crosses and struggle with temptations because he has shown us that if we want to experience life in fullest, we have to recognize his redemptive presence in the midst of it all.

Learning from Jesus how to live abundantly involves learning from him how to fight with temptation. If we desire to address any problem it is always helpful to begin by having some facts about that problem first. When we look at Jesus' struggle with temptation, we can take off our rose colored glasses and recognize several realities that can undergird our own struggle with temptation.

Life is not lived on a plateau. Life has valleys and high mountains and swiftly moving rivers and oceans and caverns. There is no way Jesus could have stayed out by the Jordan where the Spirit descended on him and a voice spoke from heaven. There is no way Jesus and disciples could have stayed on the Mount of Transfiguration. Life, to be life as God has given it, must have many textures. It cannot be lived on single plane. Great adventures usually begin in exhilaration. That is what gets us started. But inevitably there are times of trial. We are tempted to strike out in anger or quit or postpone for the sake of momentary pleasure. But we see from Jesus' experience with temptation that we should expect there to be problems and be ready to stand up to them with our vision firmly in place before us. It is of the essence of our humanity as it was the humanity of Jesus.

Jesus didn't settle everything in the wilderness. St. Luke's version of the temptation story tells us, "And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time." Just because you have a good start doesn't insure against problems. If we can have a realistic view of life's ups and downs, we see the larger context in which difficulties appear and it will help us.

The achievement of worthy goals is more important than momentary escape from pressures. I used to have a sign in my office that read, "There's never enough time to do it right, but there's always time to do it over." Have you found that to be true in your own experience? Think of wonderful friendships, churches, careers, that have been lost because people put the pressures and anxieties of the moment above the pursuit of something infinitely more valuable.

Jesus knew who he was and what he was sent to do. Today, we might say he was well self-differentiated. When faced with temptations, he maintained a fierce loyalty to his identity, his vocation, and his mission. In doing so as the Incarnate God, he showed us that it is humanly possible for us to pass through the temptations that threaten to distract us from our vocation and from worthy goals.

Our goals must be established by great visions, compelling needs, and remarkable possibilities. Then, our pursuit of those goals must be constantly guided by those realities. With temptations and distractions at every turn, it is import to learn this principle. Let the passion for the beauty and goodness of the end result determine your choices under the pressure of the moment. Don't give first class loyalties to second-class causes!

The fight with temptation belongs to you. Nobody else can do it for you. God has given us the freedom to respond and the grace to be victorious. God established this administrative policy in creation and consistently applies it. There is no force more powerful than God and yet God does not force us to respond one way or the other in the face of temptation. Each of us must choose how to respond when the time comes.

But wait. In the temptation of Jesus as told by Mark and Matthew, angels came and ministered to him. Some might think those angels were like that \$100 bill, a way out, something that Jesus had that we don't have. It might appear that someone other than him fought Jesus' fight with temptation; maybe those angels did it for him. I don't think so. I think it means God never left him and continued to make divine resources available so Jesus could persevere. And I believe those same resources are available to you and to me.

I once asked my friend Rabbi Jimmy Kessler about Jewish teaching about angels. He told me some fascinating things. But the thing I remember best is how explained that angels are everywhere in abundance. And then he told me, "There is a rabbinic saying that God has even appointed an angel to stand beside every blade of grass and say, 'Grow! Grow! Grow!'"

It is vitally important that we recognize both the strength of our temptations and our limited strength in dealing with them. Only then will we begin to recognize our need and to understand what Christ does for us. It is not because we have won the battles of life that we are confident, but because Christ has joined in the fight with us. It is not because we are so sure of our strength that we face temptation, but because we're sure of his presence with us and his power for us. To stare our temptation in the face and remain true to those lasting values that inspired us in the beginning is to open our lives to the power that preserves us. We call this process "sanctification" because exercising our wills in this way requires us to rely on divine grace. That kind of partnership with God leads us to holiness and wholeness of life. Whenever we say, "With God's help, I will," as we do in the Baptismal Covenant, we mean we are willing to respond to life's obstacles and frustrations in ways that will make it possible for God to do for us more than we alone can possibly do for ourselves. We are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever! For ever includes times of trial.

Your fight with temptation belongs to you, but you do not have to be in it alone. The One who has been tempted and did not succumb is there with you and will lend you his strength and his power and his wisdom to make the right response.

So, here we are once again at the beginning of the season of Lent. We know that the glorious message of Resurrection is at the other end of the season. It is natural for us to want to leap ahead. But our gospel for today reminds us that before the first Easter, Jesus was tempted and tested. He suffered and he died. In our lives we would like to have Easter without the wilderness of temptation, the garden of Gethsemane, or the hill called "Calvary." But we have not been promised that. What we have been promised is that when we are tempted, the grace of God will be available in abundant supply and the angels of God will minister to us.