

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**  
*Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on March 1, 2020 (I Lent, Year A)*

Mic drop. That's what I hear in Jesus's exchange with the devil as he's tempted in the wilderness. One giant mic drop in three movements. The devil's temptations about food, trust, and power are met each time with the perfect response from Jesus that render his tempter speechless. "One does not live by bread alone." Mic drop. "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Mic drop. "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." Mic drop.

And you have to admit, the witty Biblical repartee is fun to watch. It's verbal jousting at its finest, and Jesus always gets the last word. It reminds me of watching a presidential debate and seeing your favorite political candidate land a real zinger. It's fun and energizing and makes you want to cheer. Until you realize we're not electing a zinger in chief; and that substance is more important than flash.

And so even in this case, it's important to move beyond the mic drop to really hear what's happening in this passage. Jesus didn't enter the world, after all, to simply become known as the world's greatest debater. I mean, he's got some great, quotable lines! But surely that's not the point of his ministry. It's obviously deeper than that.

At one level it's hard to hear this story of Jesus' temptation without thinking about that line in the Lord's Prayer. "Lead us not into temptation." It's a curious phrase because, as I was once asked in a Confirmation class, "Why would God lead anyone into temptation? That just seems mean." And, yet, isn't that precisely what God has done here? God has seemingly led Jesus into temptation! The very thing we pray for God not to do to us.

So why *is* Jesus in the wilderness being tempted by the devil? Is God just being mean? Remember, Jesus being sent into the wilderness to fast and pray for 40 days and 40 nights happens immediately after his baptism. He has been anointed as God's Son and is now driven out into the wilderness to be tested before the start of his public ministry. He will come out of the wilderness and start calling disciples to follow him. So, in context, we see that this time apart is not setting Jesus up to fail; God is not leading him into temptation, but preparing him to serve. Preparing him for the work he has been given to do. Preparing him to share the good news of God's kingdom. Preparing him to walk the way of the cross.

And the devil plays an integral role here, reminding Jesus that he could use his power for self-interest rather than in the service of others. In a similar way, the serpent in the Garden of Eden offers Adam and Eve a choice: follow God, or follow me. Adam and Eve are tempted in the Garden; Jesus is tempted in the wilderness. But it's not God who does the tempting, right? It's the devil. God doesn't set traps for us. God's not into "gotcha moments." God doesn't lead us into temptation. That's simply not God's way.

But here's the thing: temptations abound. They're literally everywhere. On our phones, in our interactions with others, and we just listed every temptation you could possibly imagine in The (quite comprehensive) Great Litany. And temptations differ from person to person. The devil, as the personification of evil, customizes a temptation plan for each one of us. That's some full service deviling right there. Which is why one person is tempted by chocolate cake and another by Fritos; one person by alcohol and another by lust.

Whatever it is for us that acts as a barrier to God's love, sometimes we resist, sometimes we give in. That's the nature of being human. It's why one of the major themes of the season of Lent is confession and repentance. We give in, we confess, we amend our ways, and we are forgiven. And this pattern continues over and over again throughout our lives. Temptation is always with us, to varying degrees and in various ways.

That's not to say that we should just shrug our shoulders, give in to temptation, and blame the human condition. Jesus' time in the wilderness shows us that we *can* resist temptation — but, and this is the key, not by our own will. We can only successfully resist that which draws us from the love of God, with God's help.

When our now nearly 16-year-old dog Delilah was a puppy, I took her to obedience school. And one of the first commands we learned was "leave it." I was taught to cover a treat with one hand and then slowly take my hand away to reveal the treat, and say "leave it!" If Delilah started to go for it, I would quickly place my hand back over it and start the process again. Once she was able to "leave it" she'd get the treat. After awhile I'd be able to put the treat in front of her, say "leave it," and she'd just stare at it with those big puppy dog eyes until I let her have it. But as I was working with Delilah on this, all I could think about was that I was literally leading her into temptation. Dangling that treat in front of her and not letting her have it. That is not what God is doing to Jesus and that's not what God is doing with us.

God is not leading us into temptation, because the temptations are already there. The prayer is more lead us not into temptation *alone*. Lead us not into temptation in order for us to fend for ourselves. Lead us not into temptation without walking right beside us. The whole point of this wilderness experience is that Jesus is facing temptation with the support of God. He's alone out there, but not alone out there. And when we face temptation or find ourselves in whatever wilderness we may walk in our own lives, we may be alone out there, but we're not alone out there. God is with us at every step of the way.

In a sense you can literally never be alone. And that's comforting. Because whatever situation you may find yourself in, however desperate things may feel, God is with you. You don't have to face any situation, no matter how isolating or harrowing it seems, by yourself.

So as I listen to this story of Jesus resisting temptation in the wilderness, I hear a note of hope. Not because Jesus is verbally smacking down the devil, but because whatever we encounter in this life, whatever hardships or temptations we face, Jesus knows what we're going through and walks with us through it all. The 6th century saint Gregory the Great once preached that through Jesus' temptations "he might conquer our temptations, just as by his death he overcame our death." So there is comfort being in solidarity with the one who was tempted in every way as we are, yet with out sin.

May this season of Lent, which is modeled on Jesus' time in the wilderness, prepare us for the work we have been given to do. May it prepare us to walk the way of the cross. May it prepare us for the joy of Easter and the Resurrection that is to come.