

TEMPTATIONS (Lk 4:1-13)

As a result of the events of a couple of weeks ago, Rome is now frantically searching through the church's calendar to identify memorial days for the newest saints --- Saint Drew Brees, Saint Reggie Bush, Saint Sean Payton and the other members of the New Orleans Saints football team who were canonized immediately following their Super Bowl victory. New Orleans might be called "The City That Temptation Built."

Temptations --- don't you just love them? They're so enticing, so luscious, so alluring, so delicious, so ... so ... wicked. And the rewards from giving in to temptations are so delightful and pleasurable --- at least, temporarily. Just ask Tiger Woods how fleeting fame and fortune and the adulation of others can be. But don't be too hard on Tiger because every one of us is presented with temptations every day; even Jesus had his temptations.

The Bible is full of stories of temptations; some have even called it the "Book of Temptations." There's Adam and Eve and the serpent with the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden. There's Cain who is jealous of his brother Abel and thinks that by killing him, he will gain favor with God. Then there are stories of sexual temptations --- the great king David lusting after Bathsheba, the wife of one of his soldiers; there's Samson and Delilah; there's Jezebel whose very name has come to represent a seductress; there's the daughter of Herodias doing a dance for King Herod that has him salivating with lust so much that he ends up giving her the head of John the Baptist. And, of course, the Hebrew people fleeing Egypt in the desert make that golden calf to worship while at the very same time Moses is on the top of Mt. Sinai receiving the 10 commandments. Ah, yes, the Bible is not a pure, clean, chaste book by any means, but a book depicting the real-world life of humans, filled with temptations. Not only does the Bible describe the temptations, but it also describes how God is our protector when we face temptations, that in spite of giving in to our lusts for greed and power and prestige, God does not abandon us to the fires of hell. God knows that while **we** may see temptations as physical in nature and think that **we** can resist them on our own through sheer determination and willpower, temptations are really **spiritual** in nature, designed by Satan to lead us away from the love of God. Thus we need God's assistance and protection all the more. In His great love for us, God sent Jesus to show us how to deal with temptations.

The other day I was looking out the window, and I noticed a woman with her little puppy on the sidewalk in the park. She had placed the puppy a few feet from her and told it to "stay." Then she walked 3 or 4 steps away, all the while telling the puppy to "stay." Then after a few moments of standing there just

looking at the dog, she finally said, "come." And the puppy bounded up with total excitement and ran as fast as it could into the woman's outstretched, waiting arms. The love between the two of them was so uplifting that it automatically made me laugh and smile.

We are going along minding our own business, then all of a sudden someone sideswipes our car. Immediately, the anger flares up within us and we are ready to curse and blame and maybe even fight the other driver. Our anger tempts us into self-righteousness. But God tells us to "stay." "Do good to those who hurt you." Regardless of what the reasons were for the accident, getting angry will not help the situation; only love and understanding will. Oh, God never said that it would be easy to love. The man who flew his plane into a building in Austin, TX to kill IRS employees posted on his web site, "violence is not only the answer, it's the only answer." Jesus says quite the opposite: "**Love** is the answer, the **only** answer."

We have been thinking about getting a new car, you know, the bright, shiny one with all of the latest bells and whistles and safety features to protect you in case somebody sideswipes you. Then my thinking turns to single-minded obsession with having to have that car, otherwise my life just won't be complete. But something goes wrong with the negotiations and I have to let the new car go for the time being. God says, "stay." Your possessions don't define who you are. Then two weeks later, the car manufacturer issues the biggest recall in automotive history on new and used models, and the car I am currently driving just happens to be on the "safe" list. There is a wise saying that goes: "craving for things outside of yourself will not bring you happiness, only insecurity." In our human way of thinking we would consider ourselves blessed if we did not have to endure any temptations at all. Yet temptations can provide us with the way to love. It may sound strange, but I believe that there is no love without choice; we choose what we love. That's what "free will" is all about --- choosing what we love. Temptations demand that we choose between self and others, between what is good and what is evil, between God and this world. Nowhere is that more clearly seen than in the life of Jesus. He went into the desert and was without food for 40 days, then was tempted by the devil who would return again and again during his ministry to tempt him. In the Gospel of Mark every time that Jesus heals someone, he tells them not to tell anyone about it. He doesn't want the glory or the recognition; that belongs to God. He resists the temptation for fame and prestige. Several times after healing the sick and the possessed, the people want to make him king, but he always slips away, not concerned about an earthly throne. He resists the temptation for power and wealth. Certainly, he could have called upon the heavenly armies to save him from the hands of the soldiers and Pontius Pilate. And, certainly, he could have come down from the cross without enduring all of the agony which he was undergoing. But God told him "stay." He resisted the temptation to test God's love for him --- "not **my** will but **yours** be done." He countered all of

those temptations with words from scripture, all the way to his death and resurrection and into the outstretched, waiting, loving arms of his Father. So we have someone who has walked in our shoes, someone who is able to come to our aid in our temptations. I know that whenever I am faced with a temptation and I pray to Jesus to help me resist it, the next thing I know I have forgotten all about it and my mind has turned to something else, something good and wholesome. I say a simple prayer to Jesus, like "Jesus, help me to let go of this obsession which has me so preoccupied" or "Jesus, you know how weak I am, give me strength to choose your way" or even simpler just "Jesus, be with me," and I find that my heart has not only turned away from the temptation, but more amazingly turned toward him. Let us choose the ways of God; let us choose love, no matter how hard that choice may be.

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