

THE MESSAGE for March 13, 2011

Matthew 4:1-11

Lead us... Avoid the Unavoidable

The Rev. Dr. R. K. Miller

I have four temptation stories to share with you here this morning.

Story #1 – A Funny Temptation Story (from <http://louisvilleemmaus.com/jokes2.html>).

Two priests died at the same time and met Saint Peter at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter said, “I’d like to get you guys in right now, but our computer is down. You’ll have to go back to Earth for about a week, but you can’t go back as priests. So what else would you like to be?”

The first priest said, “I’ve always wanted to be an eagle, soaring above the Rocky Mountains.”

“So be it,” says St. Peter, and off flies the first priest.

The second priest thought for a moment and asked, “Will any of this week ‘count’, St. Peter?”

“No, as I said our computer is down. There’s no way we can keep track of what you’re doing.”

“In that case,” said the second priest, “I’ve always been tempted to be a stud.”

“So be it,” says St. Peter, and the second priest disappears.

A week goes by, the computer is fixed, and the Lord tells St. Peter to recall the two priests. “Will you have any trouble locating them?” The Lord asked.

“Well... The first one should be easy.” Says St. Peter, “He’s somewhere over the Rockies, flying with the eagles. But the second one could prove to be more difficult.”

“Why?” asked the Lord.

“Well, he’s on a snow tire somewhere in North Dakota.”

Sometime our temptations will take us places we never wanted to go.

Story #2 – A Serious Temptation Story

The Inuit people living in the Arctic regions of North America have a legend about how they would kill the wolves that threatened their communities and property. They describe how they are able to bring down a wolf simply by coating several layers of frozen blood on a sharp knife sticking out of the frozen tundra.

It’s believed that the wolf picks up the scent and, after circling the knife cautiously, begins licking the frozen blood on the knife. As the wolf continues licking faster and faster, the desire for blood drives the wolf wild. The craving is so great that the wolf never notices the sting of the sharp blade on his tongue as the blood he’s consuming becomes his own. Morning finds the wolf lying dead in the snow.

Sometimes our temptations can be dangerous – even deadly.

One thing we all have in common – we’ve all been tempted in one way or another. And will continue to be tempted in one way or another. The cost of giving into temptation can be devastating. Trust is compromised, jobs are jeopardized, marriages are lost, relationships are ruined, lives are destroyed. Temptation is a force more destructive and deceptive than we realize.

Story #3 – An Old Testament Temptation Story

In the second chapter of the first book of the Bible (Genesis 2) we are introduced to a character who casts doubt on God’s promises. This shady character stands in opposition to God’s goodness. He’s called many things – the crafty one, the evil one, the devil, Satan. He is known as the enemy, the father of lies, the adversary, the slanderer, the false accuser, A.K.A. the tempter.

God tells Adam and Eve that the garden is filled with everything they need for life. God has given them everything. Saying, they may freely eat of every tree of the garden, except “... of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

The tempter shows up and brings a little doubt to the promise. “Really? *Really?* Didn’t God say you could eat from any tree in the garden?” He confuses Eve with a twisted question. A little doubt goes a long way “Really? Did God *really* say that?” A simple question that raises a little doubt, and that’s all it takes. A little doubt is all it takes to get us licking that frozen blade of temptation.

Story #4 - A New Testament Temptation Story

In the first book of the New Testament (Matthew 4) that shady character from Genesis shows up again to tempt Jesus with three twisted questions. Jesus gives us a glimpse of how we can resist these temptations in our lives.

Jesus has just been baptized and is lead by the Spirit out into the desert for 40 days. He’s hungry, alone, and tired, venerable. It’s a golden opportune time for the tempter. **In the first temptation** the tempter tries to get Jesus to use his own power instead of trusting that God provides.

When we are hungry, alone, or tired we are vulnerable too. When our defense is down that’s when temptations are sooooo tempting. That’s when we turn to destructive behaviors. Satan uses whatever he can – alcohol, drugs, food, shopping, sex, the internet, whatever. They can all be used as destructive behaviors. The temptation here is to satisfy our own appetites, turning away from God’s grace and work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. When we do we are circling that proverbial knife of temptation, doubting that these destructive behaviors can do any harm.

In the second temptation, Jesus finds himself dealing with the idea that God had abandoned him. Satan casts doubt on God’s presence in his life.

Have you ever felt abandoned? Ever wondered where God is when all kinds of crazy stuff is happening to you? I sure have! A friend told me recently that “perception is everything...”

Check this out. What do you see in this phrase? God is nowhere. (*Hold up sign.*) Doubt says, “God is no where.” Faith says, “God is now here.” Jesus lived by faith.

In the third temptation Satan takes Jesus to a very high mountain and shows him all of the kingdoms of the world, and their splendor, saying to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus, who lived by faith, worshipping God in thought, word, and deed turns and says, “Away with you, Satan!” And Satan was gone.

Every time Satan tempted Jesus he relied on the Word and on God’s provision. “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

“It is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

“It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”

The tempter desires nothing more than to raise a little doubt in our minds about God. He tempts us to live our own lives on our own, putting our trust in anything but God. Jesus trusted God – period!

I love the quote, “Opportunity knocks once but temptation leans on the doorbell.” How true! So I invite you to put a CAP on our temptations. CAP is an acronym C.A.P.

The C in our CAP is for confession

When we give into temptation we love to blame. Instead we ought to take responsibility and confess our sin. God confronted Adam for giving into temptation and he blamed Eve. She made me do it. God confronted Eve for giving into temptation and she blamed the tempter. He made me do it. When we fall into temptation it is so easy to play the “blame game.” Instead we ought to confess and ask for God’s forgiveness. Confession leads to forgiveness...

The A in our CAP is for accountability

Jesus encouraged his disciples, prayed for them, and gave them a wake up call when they were in danger of falling into temptation. When we are tempted, the question is not, “what would Jesus do?” but rather “what would Jesus have me do?” And that might be different for each one of us.

God knows how much we need each other. God created us for community. And Jesus continues to work within God’s community, the church. Here we find other forgiven sinners who can hold us accountable, sharing in our weaknesses and encouraging us, praying for us, and giving us wake up calls when we are in danger of falling into temptation. Accountability leads to support...

The P in our CAP is for prayer.

In the Lord's Prayer we pray, "Lead us not into temptation" and it's a good thing we do. The doorbell continues to ring.

There are times when I can resist temptations, no problem. Other times I fail miserably. Perhaps you do too. Consider what Jesus said. "Away with you, Satan!" That's a great prayer to pray when we are being tempted. "Away with you, Satan, in Jesus' name, away with you, Satan!" Prayer leads to strength...

Sometimes we can resist answering the doorbell of temptation. Other times we'll fail miserably. The good news rings loud and clear: God loves us fully, completely and unconditionally sending Jesus to show us the way of life through faith. When it comes to temptations I pray you and I will avoid the unavoidable and putting a CAP on it. Confession, Accountability, and Prayer. Amen.