

SERMON: "THE TEMPTATIONS"

**TEXT: OLD TESTAMENT
NEW TESTAMENT**

**PSALM 32
MATTHEW 4:1-11**

**February 26, 2023
First Sunday in Lent**

Dr. J. David Kivett

INTRODUCTION

I don't want to overdo the Atlanta references. I made several last week.

Please allow me one more this week. Whenever I tell people where I grew up, they almost always say the same thing. They make the same complaint, especially Midwestern folks who've traveled through there heading to Florida to the sunshine and seafood. They talk about the ever-present Atlanta traffic.

Those travelers correctly point out that there is no way around that traffic I agree with them on that truth. It may be a little better at certain times of day or night ... but it is always there. Always. Can't really go around it
You got to go through it

The same can be said of the subject of today's sermon – temptation
Can't really go around it. You got to go through it, deal with it
You will get stuck. You will probably raise your voice and not so politely tell others what they can and should do better. You'll tell yourself "never again" and then end right back there in the same mess again.

Yes, the Lenten season, begins with the story of Jesus' temptation. Every year. It is not just about his temptation. It's about ours. Every one of us. So this morning, I thought I might name some of the temptations
... no, not the band members

We're going to talk about temptations, our temptations – yours, mine and ours
We do so because we can't go around them. We cannot avoid temptation, no matter how careful or prayerful. Jesus didn't skip over temptation
He went through it. You may have noticed that the passage says ...

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

He didn't end up in that wilderness by mistake.
The Spirit led him ... to it and through it! The Spirit leads us through it as well.

Okay, back to naming the temptations. Already started
Number one. Thinking we can avoid temptation altogether, find a way around.
This temptation takes any number of forms – often the where, the when and the who

THROUGH IT, NOT AROUND IT

Where? I think I might want to talk about my beloved beast here
Clarence is a big dog, 130 pounds. He got that big because somebody
is feeding him table scraps ... because he is such a good boy.
And he's that big because he is a not such a good boy, but a smart one

We have a trash can that opens when you step down on the pedal
He feels the temptation to snack, steps down on the pedal. The buffet is now open!
Moved things around this week. Put the trash can in the cabinet. That might work
The temptation will still be there. He will know where it has been moved
He will try to open that cabinet door.

Just because you haven't booked any travel to Vegas or New Orleans
Just because you play it kind of safe – do the same things with the same people
in a relatively small circle (a bubble). Just because you go to church often
Temptation is not far away ... it's in a cabinet you can reach and open.

You don't have to venture into a wilderness to find temptation
We are deceiving ourselves if we think so. Like the bible says in 1 John
"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us ..."

One temptation is about where ... "Not around here"
Another is about when ... "Not now. Back then. Yes, I admit it, but not now."
This one gets on my nerves because I've heard it so often from preachers
Including this preacher. We talk about sin in the past tense
"I was such a sinner. I sewed my wild oats, a rebellious teenager, etc."

I try to be honest about being a 'trail and error' learner. I think you can learn from that
But when I start talking about sin as something just in my past, please help me
I ask you to do what another dog of mine, a fine and noble beast, Shadrach,
used to do with my kids. He was part sheep dog. When they got too close
to the road, he'd nudge them back away from that danger and into the yard

Please do that when I act like sin or temptation is something from another place or time
I try to do that with my work in this community as a member of the NAACP,
the Cedar Valley Interfaith Council and the Cedar Falls Human Rights Commission

The greatest challenge we face in fighting discrimination in this community these days
is telling ourselves that racism and other forms of discrimination
are problems of another time (back in the 60's) and/or another place -
the South or closer to home, but not our homes ... Waterloo

The Christian faith at its best is an honest, humble faith
People who know they need forgiveness, a forgiven and forgiving people
who do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God
People who know the temptations. A good band ... "talking bout my girl"
and as a real challenge we face here and now ... "talking bout my sin"

YOURS, MINE AND OURS

Temptation is very real, very present. Can't ignore it. Got to go through it.
So we've named the temptation of where – not here, and the temptation
of when – not now and one more. Who – not me

The 'not me' excuse has been around forever.
It's the generic response my brothers and I used multiple times
'Who made this mess?' Mom would ask.
My answer, my brother's answer ... "Not me!"

That generic answer gets more particular and pointed over time
We move past the childhood answer of 'not me' to the more dangerous
blame shifting we so often do as adults. Look at those people, what they're doing.
Isn't one of our greatest temptations "what about ism" ... how easy
it is for us to make a big deal about someone else's supposed sin
to fixate on the speck in a neighbors eye

That said I also need to say that the opposite is so often the case as well
On one hand we can be so hard on others, "it's *all* their fault"
and on the other hand, we can be too hard on ourselves, "It's *all* my fault."
Temptations come at us from every angle, don't they?

We read the story of Jesus' temptation in the gospels every year
as a way of being honest about our temptations, to help us get through them

The three temptations outlined here are all temptations for Jesus to be "less than"
Less than who is and who he is called to be ... less than God's Beloved Son
Isn't that our temptation as well, to be something less than
what God has created and called us to be, less than faithful?

The three temptations mentioned in this story may not sound too familiar
Not to us, but to the original audience of Matthew's gospel they did
These are the temptations faced by the children of Israel
after God led them out of slavery and into guess where ... the wilderness
Tom Long, reminds us of that not so coincidental coincidence

*The way the story is told in Matthew underscores the fact that Jesus
in the wilderness is undergoing precisely the same tests, and in precisely
the same sequence, as Israel did in the wilderness. Jesus is tempted
first regarding hunger (verse 1-4), second regarding putting God
to the test (verse 5-7), and third regarding false worship (verse 8- 10)*

We may not have the same historical reference points to see how Jesus' temptations
mirror exactly the temptations faced by Israel in the wilderness, but the story
is very much addressed to us as well ... as a community

SUMMARY

I got involved in church through youth group.

Started going to Peachtree Presbyterian Church when I was 16.

It was a very large church with a great preacher, Frank Harrington

The focus of worship was the sermon, everything led up to that

The service did not include a prayer of confession

I then went to college in Athens, First Presbyterian.

That was my first introduction to a prayer of confession in worship each week.

I felt a sense of relief in finding that prayer in there each week. I needed it.

I still need it and look forward to it every week.

One of the things I've grown to appreciate about that confession each week is that we do it together. It may be a written prayer we say together.

It may be a prompt from the pastor asking us all to think about a certain theme

Whatever and however it is not just about me, it's about us

Just like it was with the people of Israel, so it is with the church

You see another temptation we face is over individualizing things

We can blame any one of (or all of) our social ills on a few 'bad apples.'

That makes those ills easier to ignore or minimize,

makes it easier to say "not here, not now, not me ... and not us"

while rights are taken away and wrongs are normalized

One more temptation (the other side of the coin) ... Cynicism

We can also be tempted to admit all of the above – the where, when and who

And just say "so, not much we can do about it. It is what it is."

Cynicism is so easy ... and so very dangerous

Let me then end the sermon addressing the cynics around us and inside of us

We can't end a sermon by just naming the temptations.

Like Atlanta traffic, we have got to find a way through.

Jesus found a way through ... And Jesus will get us through.

He will get us through because he is the way through. We call it grace.

I'd describe the journey through temptation this way

Take you to another great American city, the one where our oldest daughter,

Sophie Ann, went to college – New Orleans.

Have you heard of a jazz funeral? They do them for notable New Orleans icons, especially for musicians. The parade starts slow and somber, black attire.

It continues like that for a while ... But then it changes. The tune changes.

It becomes loud, festive. The black clothes give way to colorful attire.

It's their way of illustrating the journey of life and death ... and life eternal

The temptations are there along the journey. But through those temptations

there is a melody that will end up with us dancing in the streets, marching in

with all the saints who got through life's traffic ... by way of grace