**1 Lent**

**Christ Church**

**2017 A**

**March 5, 2017**

Please be seated and as you do please join me in prayer:

Dear Lord, In your grace and in your love, make me wiser.
In your grace and in your love, make me kinder.
In your grace and in your love, open up my heart, mind, and soul to see your glorious truth within me. Amen

In the 1970s comedian Flip Wilson made "The Devil made me do it" a national catchphrase. As host of his own TV variety show, Flip Wilson created a recurring character named Geraldine. And every time her husband accused her of doing something wrong, whether it was buying a dress that was too expensive, or crashing the car into the side of the church, her excuse was always the same: "It wasn't me. The Devil made me do it."

Many of us grew up hearing that catchphrase, and it’s affected the way we see the devil. We believe he has the power to "make" us do things. Or we imagine him as a little guy wearing a red suit, with a pitchfork, sitting on our left shoulder, whispering in our ear. And meanwhile, there's a little angel perched on our right shoulder, trying to counteract whatever temptation the devil is whispering to us. And in the cartoons, the devil usually won.

So is this really how temptation works? Is the devil really equally as powerful as God? Can he "make" us do anything we don't want to do? I believe the answer to that question is no. Jesus made it clear that the God who is in us is greater than any of the forces or temptations in the world.  The truth is, the devil or temptation or whatever we choose to call it, doesn't have any power over us that we don't let happen.

But let’s be honest the temptation is always there. I recently read a story about a little boy named Bobby who desperately wanted a new bicycle. His plan was to save his nickels, dimes and quarters until he finally had enough to buy a new 10-speed. Each night he asked God to help him save his money. Kneeling beside his bed, he prayed, "Dear Lord, please help me save my money for a new bike, and please, Lord, don't let the ice cream man come down the street again tomorrow.”

We can make jokes but honestly temptation is no laughing matter. Temptation is a reality in our lives. Temptation knows no boundaries. We are all tempted on a daily basis. We are subjected to the forces of greed, power, jealousy and prestige. It is simply and inexplicably woven into the nature of human life that we will all face deeply challenging tests and often at highly unexpected moments. What can’t be predicted is the exact substance of those trials. They vary according to our unique circumstances and dispositions. Some temptations will be far more nuanced than others, with sin masquerading as something entirely different. Few, if any, will be as clearly marked as the devil’s dialogue with Jesus in today’s Gospel or the serpent’s with Eve.

Today we see that Jesus is tempted in the wilderness. Jesus is baptized and anointed in the Spirit and then is immediately led into the desert for a time of reflection, to be alone and to ready himself for the ministry that lay in front of him. And it is at this time that Jesus is tempted. The three temptations Matthew recorded for us fall into broad categories that can be applied to temptations we face today.

First, there was an appeal to physical needs. Jesus was hungry, and the devil tempted Him to make the stones become bread. Second, there was the temptation to take a short cut. Jesus knew what He needed to do to fulfill the Father's plan. He had to go to Jerusalem, suffer, and be killed. The devil tempted Jesus to bypass all of that with a dramatic display of God's power that would firmly establish Jesus as the Son of God. Finally, the devil tempted Jesus with power: "I will give you the kingdoms of the world if you will worship me." Jesus never disputed that the worldly kingdoms were the devil's to give, but he knew that the heavenly kingdom was what we all need to concern ourselves with.

Jesus responded to all three of the devil's temptations with Scripture. Notice He didn't say, "Hold on a minute, Devil, while I look up a bible verse." He had God's Word in His heart. As Christians we too need to have God’s words in our hearts each and every day, not just pulling the Bible off the shelf in case of emergency.

A woman had a fondness for beautiful clothes and she overspent because of this fondness. She and her husband had worked on it, and he thought she was doing better. Every time she was drawn to a clothing boutique or a display in a department store window, she would talk to herself, “Don’t do it...don’t do it...remember how much you owe...you don’t need it...you’ve worn the last dress only once...you owe a fortune still...remember how John feels about it...don’t do it...get thee behind me Satan.”

She made it for about six weeks, and then came home one day with a gorgeous $350 dress. Her husband couldn’t understand it. Why? “The Devil got me again,” she said. “I couldn’t resist.” “But how often have we talked about it?” he moaned.

“It has worked before. For six weeks you’ve overcome by fighting back, get thee behind me Satan.” “This time it came too late.” she responded. I thought I was strong enough just to look. But before I knew it, I had the dress on, looking at myself in the mirror. The dress was gorgeous, but I fought back. Get behind me, Satan. But before I could move from the mirror, he said, “It looks as good from the back as it does from the front.”

We all encounter Jesus in our victories and in our failures. Jesus is with us in our right choices and wrong choices. Jesus is with us always. My brand of wilderness simply does not translate directly to yours. I am not proud to say that I have failed many of these tests. I am human and do not have a perfect scorecard. But there is good news here, even amidst the moments of regret and missed opportunities. Remember that the Holy Spirit accompanied Jesus throughout his encounter with the devil. The same is true for us. We are promised that God will never leave or forsake us. Help is always just a prayer away, no matter how desolate or challenging the wilderness in which we find ourselves. We can acknowledge our weakness as human beings and allow the power of God to do the heavy lifting for us.

Not only this, but, even when we do miss the mark and glaringly succumb to temptation, God remains by our sides and creatively recalculates the route to the mountain top, nudging us back toward the right path. Far from a random occurrence, the trials of Jesus were a critical component of his spiritual and vocational formation. It afforded him opportunities for growth and discernment. If we let them, our wilderness challenges too can purposefully mold us, enabling us to hear and respond in new and deeper ways to God’s unique call for the next steps of each of our journeys. Tests, even those we don’t pass with flying colors, need not defeat us. Hunger and barren wilderness, no matter how severe, need not overcome us. For ours is a God of presence and possibility.

My brothers and sister, as we step away from the light of Epiphany into the dark soul searching season of Lent, let us remember that ours is a God of infinite possibilities and redemption who never, ever gives up on us no matter how bewildered, disoriented, or distracted we might become on the winding path to get closer to him. Whether safely tucked into our homes or enduring the harshest of conditions, in every season, our God’s name is Emmanuel, God with us.

Amen