

"Steadfast Under Temptation"  
James 1:12-18

February 26, 2012

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday In Lent

Americans have always had a great “can do” attitude about life. If we see something that needs to be done, we can do it! I’ve been watching a documentary on *The West* by Ken Burns. One episode talked about the need to connect the established states in the east with the territories in the west. The idea of a transcontinental railroad was brought up in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It seemed to be an impossible dream. However, people said, “No problem.” Lay track for 3,000 miles? We can do it! Tunnel through mountains? We can do it! Endure oppressive heat, staggering amounts of snow, and dangerous attacks by Indians? We can do it. And, do you know what? With none of the modern technology we have today, they did it! They built a railroad from coast to coast.

It’s no wonder we bring that kind of “can do” attitude into our spiritual lives. It’s born and bred in us. When we read, “Blessed is the man who endures temptation,” we say, “No problem. We can do it!” And we try our hardest, as Christians, to endure temptation and overcome it. All we have to do is avoid a certain place or situation so we don’t sin. We just have to avoid doing wrong. We just have to do more good. If we concentrate on those things, we can endure temptation....or so we think.

However, if we honest with ourselves, we find that enduring temptation is not as easy as we thought. We find that temptation is not an occasional thing which strikes us in the weak times of our lives. It is a constant thing. Temptation seems to pounce on us without warning. It’s there before we know it. And it’s there often. The amount of temptations become simply overwhelming.

The kinds of temptations are equally overwhelming. There are not just temptations to do things we normally wouldn’t do anyway – murder, rob banks, and so on. There are the many temptations to do the little things which we like doing – cursing the person who cuts us off in traffic, getting revenge through some snide remark made to someone who has offended us, fudging on our taxes, downloading things off the internet which we haven’t paid for, and so on.

If all this were not enough to do in our “can do” attitude, the scope of temptation might do it. The Law of God regulates not only our words and actions, but our thoughts as well. Not only is doing a sinful action a sin, but thinking about a sinful action is a sin. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, becoming angry is the same as murder; lusting after another person sexually is the same as adultery. Even if we can control all of our actions, who can possibly control all their thoughts? We give in to temptations almost as fast as they enter our head.

Our “can do” attitude becomes a “can not” reality. So we do what all good Americans do: we blame. We may blame God for letting these temptations come to us (which is, effectually, blaming God for the temptation). We may blame Satan, not only for the temptations, but also for our giving in to the temptations. “The devil made me do it,” was not only a funny line in the 1970’s, but a way to get the responsibility for temptation and sin off our backs. If none of this blaming works, then we will blame our circumstances, our culture, our genetics, or anything else we can think of to take the pressure off us.

The problem is that our inability to endure under temptation is not outside of ourselves. In our text, James says, “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God’, for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone.” James doesn’t say the problem is located in the devil, either. He gives us an answer we don’t like. It’s along the lines of the old comic strip character *Pogo* who said, “We have met the enemy and he is us.” The problem we have in enduring temptation and resisting sin lies within each us. *We* are the problem.

James describes the problem as a perverse birth process. Each person is ultimately tempted by their own sinful desires. Our desires draw us away and entice us. The language here is the language of fishermen who lure their prey out of hiding and then entice it with bait to their fishing nets. Our desires draw us out of our neutral state and then allure us with a definite bait to sin. When that happens, desire conceives (the word here is the word for literally “becoming pregnant”) and gives birth to sin. When sin matures and becomes fully grown, it brings forth death.

James says, “Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.” In other words, don’t be fooled. You don’t stand a chance of enduring under temptation. You can’t get away from the enemy within. You are your own worst enemy. Your sinful desires will always be there working against you. You will fall into sin. And, because of that, you are doomed to die.

Then who IS this man who is blessed for enduring temptation of whom James speaks? There has been only one Man in the history of the world who has ever done that: Jesus Christ. Part of our Lord’s initiation into His ministry was being fully tempted by the devil. As we begin our Lenten journey on this 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent, that’s where we start. We don’t start with sin. We don’t start with crucifixion. We start with the one who brought sin into the world, corrupting our desires, and giving us death: the devil. Jesus faced him. Our Gospel reading says, “And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan.”

But, unlike us, Jesus was not only tempted, but He was able to endure temptation without sin. The Scriptures say, “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven,<sup>[1]</sup> Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” (Hebrews 4:14-15)

The question here is not WHAT Jesus did, but WHY He did it. Jesus never did anything for Himself (including resisting temptation). He always did everything for us. His actions are credited to our account by God. As Paul wrote to the Romans, “Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.” (Rom. 5:18-19) Jesus’ victory over Satan and temptation are credited to our account. By His actions, we are made righteous and holy before Him.

That includes paying the price for all the times we give into temptation by allowing our desires to entice us and entrap us. This is the major emphases in Lent. The one Man who endured

temptation and made us righteous is the one Man who bore all our sins on the cross, paying our full debt before God and His perfect justice. We have His forgiveness in addition to His righteousness.

What's more, the Father of lights showers every good and perfect gift upon us. The most important gift is the gift of new birth and life. He reverses the perverse birth of desires being conceived, giving birth to sin, which grows into death. In baptism, "of His own will, He brought us forth (literally "gave birth) by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures." Like Adam, the first man, we have become the firstfruits of a new people – the people of God. It is as St. John wrote in the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of His Gospel, "to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." (John 1:12-13)

Living as children of God in this world does not mean temptation disappears. In fact, for Christians, it may even become worse. We should not and cannot take the attitude of, "Well, we don't have to worry about temptation because Jesus took care of it all." Such an apathetic attitude toward temptation will kill us just as much as an attitude of self-reliance in overcoming temptation will kill us.

In facing temptation, the only way – the ONLY way – to deal with it is by completely trusting in the Man who endured temptation – Jesus Christ – rather than our own efforts. We must cling to Him and Him alone. We cling to Him in His Word – hearing, reading, and learning it on a constant basis. When we read the account of Jesus' temptations in Matthew and Luke, we see the way Jesus addressed the Tempter: "It is written..."

We cling to Him in His Sacrament where we are united with His body and blood in the bread and the wine. We receive Him, His forgiveness, and His strength. He was approved by God and received the crown of life. In our union with Jesus, we, too, are approved by God and declared right in His eyes. We, too, receive the crown of life in heaven forever.

After becoming a pastor, I always thought it was strange that "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" was the hymn of the day for the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent. Not only did it seem to be too "cheery" for such a

solemn occasion, but it was too tied, in my mind, to Reformation Day. Nevertheless, it is a perfect fit for this day when we consider Jesus' temptation by the devil and its meaning.

*Though devils all the world should fill, All eager to devour us,  
We tremble not, we fear no ill; They shall not overpow'r us.  
This world's prince may still Scowl fierce as he will,  
He can harm us none. He's judged; the deed is done.  
One little Word can fell him.*

That's not only the written Word, but the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, who has defeated the devil. He is the one man who has endured temptation, overcome it, and died for the fruits of that temptation, namely, sin. For that, we are blessed and enjoy the crown of life for all eternity. Amen.