

The collect for the First Sunday of Lent introduces both the scripture reading and the sermon theme for today. *"Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted of Satan: come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations, and as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save."*

I love that prayer because right off the bat it admits reality – it admits how things are. It calls a thing what it is. It recognizes that we are assaulted by many temptations. Assault is a strong word. We're not teased or toyed with or tickled by temptations; instead, we are assaulted by them. Assault is a word that is never used in a nice way. This world is devil filled and threatens to undo us, as Luther says in the famous hymn.

Then the prayer admits that we are weak in the face of the assault. And even better, that God knows that we are weak. And still even better, God knows the individual and particular weaknesses of each of us. Men's temptations are often different from women's. Younger people are sometimes tempted in different ways than older people. My temptations might be different from your temptations. But we can be sure that each one of us is assaulted by many temptations, and each one of us is weak in the face of the assault.

In the gospel reading this morning Jesus is assaulted by three different temptations. As the Lenten Proper Preface says that Jesus was in every way tempted as we are but did not sin, I want to look at these three temptations that are common to us. Again, your temptations may be different from your neighbor's temptations, but the three temptations that Jesus faced pretty much run the gamut of our human experience.

In the first temptation the devil tempts Jesus with bread. Pretty basic, in some ways, because Jesus hadn't eaten for 40 days. Jesus answers, "Man shall not live by bread alone," which is both a profound philosophical statement and a description of his own reality over the past 6 weeks. I see this temptation as covering all the temptations regarding our material sufficiency, not just those involving chocolate cake. It is the temptation to believe that if we have all our living needs in order then we will be happy and fulfilled. It is the temptation of materialism.

I should say I'm no fan of poverty and anyone who is or has been poor will warn you against romanticizing poverty. But what I am saying is there is a temptation to believe that if we get our material houses in order, then all will be well. We will live happily by bread alone.

We live in a fine house. It is fine house in a fine neighborhood. It is a 1950's brick ranch, without much imagination. But it is a fine house with a fireplace and a screened porch. But regularly we are tempted to find fault with the ordinariness of

this 1950 brick ranch house and feel that our very lives depend on adding an addition or painting it some nice color. Or at least get crown molding for the living room. If we could just get crown molding for the living room and maybe a new oriental runner for the hall then all will be well. We are tempted to believe that our happiness lies in crown molding. Man and Woman shall not live by crown molding alone.

C.S. Lewis comments on this “if only” temptation. *“One begins by thinking that if only something external happened; if only after the war you could get a better job, if only you could get a new house or if only your mother-in-law or daughter-in-law was no longer living with you; if something like that happened, then things would really be better.”* The first temptation has enough variations to last a lifetime. Let each one find Him mighty to save.

But the devil does not stop there. In the second temptation, Satan tempts Jesus with power and glory. The devil shows Jesus the kingdoms of the world and says, *“To you I will give all this authority and glory.”* Again, Jesus has been by himself in the wilderness for 6 weeks, accompanied only by the animals. He may have felt isolated and insignificant. To be offered power and glory in this moment would have surely been tempting.

This second temptation covers all the ways we are tempted to exert our control, specifically for our own ends, or our own glory. Sometimes the first material temptations run their course. We realize that bread alone – even when it’s the finest bread the world has to offer – does not satisfy. You get to the so-called top of whatever ladder you’ve been climbing and you say, “Is this all?”

So then you try to exercise hyper control over your existence for your own ends and purposes – your authority for your glory. You build the kingdom of your self. Other people become a means to your ends, or as we confessed in the Ash Wednesday liturgy, we are consumed with *“our own self-indulge appetites and ways, and our exploitation of other people.”* As we exert control to build the kingdom of our self, people become pawns. They exist to serve you. You become the object of worship.

You have some obsession that fits into this category. So do I. Maybe more than one. It is the thing you think you cannot live without. Your security. Your reputation. Your image of who you are. And you use all authority and control to obtain it. The main problem with this temptation is that the kingdom that you are building for your own glory will soon become a hell for you, if it has not already. Hell is getting what you want. Hell is when your Kingdom is finally built, you end up spending eternity with yourself at the center of your own world.

In Lewis’ Chronicles of Narnia, his characters come upon the Island Where Dreams Come True. Sounds good at first, doesn’t it? Who wouldn’t want their

dreams to come true? Disney would go out of business if this didn't sound good. But think a little more deeply. The characters are initially thrilled when they come to an island, but then they encounter a terrorized castaway. "*Fools!*" he cries. "*Do you hear what I say! This is where dreams – dreams, do you understand – come to life, come real. Not daydreams: dreams.*"

Think about your actual dreams. How many of them are nightmares? Do you want them to come true? Do you really want the responsibility of charting your own course? Do you really want "authority"? Living that way brings it's own terrors and monsters, as JK Rowling said in her Harvard Commencement address last year. Jesus did not accept this offer from the devil. He said that authority and glory belong to God alone. "*You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve.*" In this temptation, let each one find Him mighty to save.

The third and final temptation is in some ways the scariest. The devil whisks Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and in effect says, "Ok. You say God is who He says He is – You say your God exists – then prove it. Hurl yourself off this temple roof and trust your so called God to save you."

This is the temptation that is at the bottom of all temptations – the temptation to believe that God isn't real, that the story of God's Son coming to us is a fairy tale. It is the temptation to believe that our creation was a random act of chance, our existence is only what we make of it, and our end is nothingness.

Someone dear to me once had a kind of nervous breakdown along these lines. She was walking through the crowded streets of Washington DC. Over the past months, she had begun to drift from her Christian faith and was troubled in her spirit. Though the streets of DC were bustling, in a moment she felt completely alone, abandoned. She felt as though she were trapped all alone in a cell, with cold grey walls extending up as far as she could see.

I do not even like to speak of this kind of nihilism. Nor did Jesus. He answered the devil, "*You shall not the Lord your God to the test.*" Then the devil departed from Jesus until an opportune time.

We are assaulted by temptations. We are weak in the face of them. But, make no mistake, Jesus Christ, who was tempted in everyway as we are, is mighty to save. And He has already been found mighty to save! He has already saved you and he has already covered and protected you. He did this later in Jerusalem, an opportune time when the devil tempted Jesus in the opposite way. He tempted Jesus to NOT throw his life away for the sake of others, to forgo his suffering on the cross, to let this cup pass from Him. But, of course, He didn't. Jesus, for your sake, withstood this last temptation of Christ. In doing so He has vanquished every evil.

My prayer for you today is that in the assault of temptation, each one will find the One who has saved us mighty to save. Amen.