

Struggling with temptation

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Lent's 40 days of preparation for baptism and discipleship are modeled on Jesus' postbaptismal test in the wilderness. Reading about Jesus' struggle with the devil opens up some potential directions for the preacher's journey to Sunday:

- Each of the three temptations invites Jesus to bypass suffering. In each he is offered triumph and glory. The desire to win approval, to be the best church, to succeed in some measurable, noticeable way always besets the church.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky describes a church that has chosen to accept the tempting path of "miracle, mystery and authority." ("The Grand Inquisitor" chapter is worth rereading this week.) Might the sermon invite the congregation to wrestle with the ways that it is tempted to accept the devil's bargain? How is it tempted to bypass suffering—suffering within and without the congregation?

- The narrative begins by noting that the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted, then concludes with the devil leaving him and angels coming to wait upon Jesus. But during the time of testing Jesus is apparently on his own with the devil. This is how temptation works. It isolates. It shows up when we are craving solace. It seeks us out when we are vulnerable. Jesus has the strength to withstand temptation even when he is alone. The ashes on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday remind us that we are mortal. We do not have his capacity to always say no to temptation when we—individuals or congregations—are isolated, in need and weak.

In 12-Step programs like AA, one of the keys to recovery from habitually saying yes to temptation is partnership with a sponsor who is available 24/7 when temptation threatens to overwhelm. What might our congregations look like if they were communities of mutual support in the face of temptations? Who in our congregation

would we phone when we found ourselves tempted again to shop 'til we drop? Who could we call on to help us avoid the temptation to walk away from a neighbor in pain? Why is this practice the norm in a 12-Step group but so unusual in the church of Jesus Christ?

- At least two other texts come to mind when reading of Jesus' temptations: Matthew 6:13 ("lead us not into temptation") and 1 Corinthians 10:13 ("with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it"). Temptation is a basic category of life for those who follow Jesus. We pray to avoid temptation yet it cannot finally be avoided.

Nikos Kazantzakis's novel *The Last Temptation of Christ* portrays a Jesus who is subject to every human temptation including fear, doubt, depression, reluctance and lust. Not even Jesus, although fully human as the Nicene Creed reminds us, avoids temptation. Perhaps in the sermon the preacher can offer the "free gift" (Rom. 5:12-19) of naming and normalizing our hard struggles with temptation and of announcing the gift of amazing grace in Jesus Christ that leads us on the path of recovery which is the way of salvation. That grace is embodied in a people whose baptism joins them to a community of those who seek to repent—to change their habits of saying yes to the tempter.