

"INTO THE WILDERNESS OF TEMPTATION"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
February 12, 1989

"INTO THE WILDERNESS OF TEMPTATION"

INTRODUCTION Every time I walk by the bicycle shop at Lexington Avenue and East 88th Street and gaze upon that beautiful Columbia yellow and green bike with balloon tires, a light and a horn, I'm reminded of the story of the 10 year old boy who badly wanted a new bike. His plan was to save his nickels, dimes and quarters until he finally had enough to buy the bike of his dreams. Each night he took his concern to the Lord and kneeling beside his bed, he prayed:

"Lord...please help me save for my new bicycle...and please, Lord, don't let the Ice Cream man come down our street tomorrow."

Not too far back the Readers Digest told about an overweight business executive who decided it was time to shed some excess pounds. He took his diet seriously...even changing his driving route to avoid his favorite bakery. One morning, however, he arrived at work carrying a gigantic coffee-cake. Everyone in the office scolded him, but his smile remained on his face. He said,

"This is a very special coffeecake. I accidentally drove by the bakery this morning and there in the window ~~were~~ a host of goodies. I felt this was no accident and so I prayed, 'Lord, if you want me to have one of these delicious coffee-cakes, then let me have a parking place directly in front of the bakery.'

And sure enough" he continued...."the eighth time around the block, there it was!"

THE WILDERNESS OF TEMPTATION

Our subject today is temptation and all of us ~~know~~ what it is to enter the wilderness of temptation. Temptation is part and parcel of the human condition.

Somewhere I read about a young woman out in Colorado who had herself sent to jail in order to avoid being tempted to marry. She asked a juvenile judge to place her in jail in order to prevent her wedding that was scheduled later in the month. She was only 17 years ~~old~~ and was in love with a man much older. He was 30. She felt it was not in her best interest. Still, she couldn't resist him when in his presence. We don't know what happened to her after she was released from jail. We do know, however, what it is to be tempted.

And the "Good News" for this day is that we do not have to give in to temptation. There is One who has faced the tempter and has defeated him. Our Scripture Lesson for the day contains one of Jesus' encounters with the tempter. Immediately after the baptism of Jesus, He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where He was tempted by the Devil. It would not be the only time, nor the last time. Throughout His life **and ministry He faced the Tempter** and yet without sinning.

What can we learn from Jesus about dealing with the tempter? For you and I are tempted daily. What help can Christ give us in our battle...in our private struggles...with that power within us that would destroy us?

THOUGHT AND DEED

Now to begin with it is clear that Jesus was very much aware of the powerful connection between thought and deed. In that beautiful prayer that He taught His disciples to pray, we find these words, "Lead us not into temptation..." (Matthew 6: 13). It is one thing to pray for forgiveness. It is quite another to be so earnest in our commitment to Christ that we pray passionately, "Keep me from even being tempted".

In the sixth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, we come across those words that Jimmy Carter helped to make more visible, "You have heard it was said, you shall not commit adultery. But I say unto you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart". I think we miss the point if we try to make this into an example of unattainable perfectionism. Rather it is a recognition on the part of Jesus of a truth about human nature - simply this: the deed begins with the thought.

A young married woman sits in her pastor's office. She describes to him a marriage gone stale, a husband with 'misplaced' priorities, a situation in which she has excessive time on her hands and a longing for a bit of excitement, a touch of romance, perhaps, in the heart. "Yesterday I had lunch with an old friend, a man I almost married" she says. "I hadn't seen him in years. Did I do wrong?" Of course there is nothing wrong with a simple lunch with an old friend - or is there? Perhaps there is a danger...

Someone once said that opportunity knocks only once but temptation bangs on your door for years. Jesus knew the power of temptation over the human soul. Listen as He instructs His disciples on the night that He is betrayed. Luke writes,

"And He came out, and went, as was His custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed Him. And when He came to the place He said to them, 'Pray that you may enter not into temptation.'"

Notice the linkage - prayer and temptation.

And what follows here is a description of Jesus' own battle with the tempter. It's here that He prays, "Father...if Thou art willing...remove this cup from Me..." The description of His struggle in Luke's Gospel indicates that this prayer was no mere formality. "His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground". He knew what it was to battle temptation. His own humanity was engaged in a great contest with His divinely appointed task. It is interesting, though, when He returns to His disciples and finds them sleeping, He wakes them and instructs them once more, "Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation". Once more He links prayer and temptation.

I believe we can learn from that linkage. The best way to deal with that little ol' sin that so easily besets us is to "nip it" in the bud. Pray that we shall not even be tempted.

DESTRUCTIVENESS OF SIN

And, of course, to pray that we shall not be tempted is to imply that the fruit of temptation - that is, sin - is destructive to our lives.

Sometimes we are like the train locomotive that decided it was tired of running back and forth on the same boring track. The unhappy thought of the adventure it was missing because it had to run on tracks kept gnawing away at it. And so, one day it decided to jump the tracks and that results in a terrible crash and a lot of people got hurt. Dear friends, terrible crashes do take place when people decide that they can ignore God's laws.

Whatever Bedame of Sin was the title of a book published in 1973 by Dr. Karl Menninger. I remember doing several sermons on it. In it he expressed his concern about the way sin was being ignored or made respectable. To be sure, he was glad that some so-called sins were better understood and dealt with. But on the other hand, he said something in that book that lingers,

"There is immorality; there is unethical behavior; there is wrong-doing. And I hope to show that there is usefulness in retaining the concept and indeed the word Sin"

M. Scott Peck came along about 10 years later and exposed the true nature of sin when he noted that "evil" is "live" spelled backward. What a revealing insight that can be if you are mindful of all the implication. Evil is "anti-life". Sin is destructive to healthy relationships, healthy bodies, healthy souls. It means death to everything that is good, wholesome and lasting.

We tend to laugh when the actress in the musical Oklahoma sings, "I'm just a little girl who couldn't say NO". We smile and snicker with Mae West when she sighs seductively, "To err is human...but it feels divine". However, in a day in which one out of two new marriages will one day end up in divorce, when a record number of children will grow up in broken homes, when white collar crime is counted in the millions, when young lives are being drained and often destroyed by drugs and alcohol abuse, when untold millions live in emptiness and despair, guilt and brokenness, it is time for us to deal with the lure and power of the tempter in our lives.

For you see, most of us can handle the big crises in life. It's the little foxes that eat the vines, as Solomon noted thousands of years ago. Bobby Leach, an Englishman, startled the world earlier in this century by going over Niagara Falls in a barrel and escaping serious harm. However, he did suffer a serious injury several years later. He slipped...on an orange peel. And I think that is the way the tempter works. And left to our own resources, He does have the power to destroy us.

PRAY And to pray that we shall not be tempted is to declare that the fruit of temptation - sin, ie - is destructive to our lives. It is also to affirm, however, that there is one whose power is greater than that of the tempter. As John puts it in his Gospel (John 4: 4):

"Greater is He that is in you, than He that is in the world".

In ancient mythology there are many stories about the island where the sirens lives. When ships sailed close to their island, the sirens sang so beautifully that the enchanted sailors would steer their ships upon the rocks to their destruction. The sirens then would collect their spoils from the wreckage. However, one day a ship came past on which the sailors did not heed the song of the sirens and sailed on in safety. The reason the sailors

were not interested was that Orpheus - the God of music - was on board and he sang a sweeter song than any known to the sirens.

I know that this is an imperfect analogy of what happens when we entrust our lives to Christ. To me, the best antidote for temptation is to be so filled with His song...His Word of salvation...His service...His spirit...that there is simple no room for temptation. But that does not relieve us of the burden of praying nightly for His divine care.

I like what Harry Emerson Fosdick once wrote:

"So often in the battle, we go to the Lord, and pray and plead and appeal for victory, for ascendancy, for mastery over the forces of evil and death, and our thought is that in some way the Lord is going to come in with a mighty exercise of power and put us into a place of victory and spiritual ascendancy in an act.

That is, we have the notion that we are going to suddenly arrive at the spiritual place where we are delivered from the wiles of the tempter. Nothing could be farther from the truth. I am reminded of that place in Exodus where God says to the Israelites concerning their enemies in the Promised Land, 'I will not drive them out from before thee in one year; lest the land become desolate and the beast of the field multiply against thee. Little by little I will drive them out before thee, until thou be increased'"
(Exodus 23: 29 - 30)

REMEMBER: GOD WORKS THIS WAY

That is the way God generally works in life - little by little. But He does work! Our prayers are answered. And if our prayers be that He shall deliver us from temptation then we shall prevail. As Paul writes in Romans, chapter 10, verse 13, "Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved."

I believe it. It may not be according to our timetable. Or, it may not be handled exactly to the desires of our hearts. But God is faithful in answering our prayers for help. Remember that always.

I remember in my church history course years ago first hearing about Monica, the mother of Augustine and how she prayed for her errant son...that God would block her son's planned trip to Italy. Monica was a devout Christian and it broke her heart to see her son wasting his life in so many undesirable indulgences in and around his home city of Carthage. She knew that there were many temptations in Italy for a young man. But while she was praying, Augustine was sailing for Italy. It was in Italy, however, that God worked a great miracle in Augustine's life. One afternoon in the year 386, he fell under the influence of the mighty preacher, Ambrose, and became a Christian - in the very place that his mother prayed that he would not go.

I think we have to be careful in giving God His orders for the day. Always there is the temptation to assume that we know more than He knows, that

we care more than He cares, that we can see the future a little bit better than He can. He does know. He does care. He does see and He does answer prayer though His answer may come in a form that we never recognize.

CLOSING ILLUSTRATION

In 1982 a young man named Michael Fagan made the headlines by breaking into Buckingham Palace. He even made his way into Queen Elizabeth's bedroom and woke her up. Fagan said the Queen "looked astonished" when she realized he was not a servant. He told her his name and said,

"I'm sorry to be here like this...but it's the only way
I could get anyone to listen to me. I'm not here to
hurt or hinder you. Please don't be afraid."

He said that the Queen was not nervous and told him, "Please...carry on". Fagan said, "I sat down on the edge of her bed and she pushed herself a bit further up on the pillows to listen". Fagan told the Queen he had four children and his wife left him but he could not get any help from welfare workers to look after them.

He said, "People like me, maam, are scraping the bottom of the barrel." To his great pleasure, Queen Elizabeth gave Michael Fagan a sympathetic ear.

A SYMPATHETIC EAR

Isn't it great that we do not have to break into God's House to get a sympathetic ear? Temptation is very real in our lives - as it was real in the life of our Lord. We need to realize that the thought is connected to the deed and pray that we shall not even be tempted.

We need to recognize the destructiveness of sin in our lives and confront our own susceptibility. No one is immune.

Finally, we need to learn to rely on Him whose power is greater than the power of the tempter and can give us victory over every temptation that can confront us in our life-long struggle to be His children in the highest and finest sense of that word.

So, dar friend, whoever you are...whatever form that temptation may take in your life - gossip, drink, drugs, sex...you name it...remember this and like Jesus, don't be afraid to take it to the Lord in prayer.

PRAYER