

2.26.23 – Lent 1
“Temptation and Forgiveness”
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Psalm 32 (HCSB)

The Joy of Forgiveness, Davidic. A Maskil.

¹ How joyful is the one
whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered!
² How joyful is the man
the Lord does not charge with sin
and in whose spirit is no deceit!
³ When I kept silent, my bones became brittle
from my groaning all day long.
⁴ For day and night Your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was drained
as in the summer's heat. *Selah*
⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to You
and did not conceal my iniquity.
I said,
“I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,”
and You took away the guilt of my sin. *Selah*
⁶ Therefore let everyone who is faithful pray to You
at a time that You may be found.
When great floodwaters come,
they will not reach him.
⁷ You are my hiding place;
You protect me from trouble.
You surround me with joyful shouts of deliverance. *Selah*
⁸ I will instruct you and show you the way to go;
with My eye on you, I will give counsel.
⁹ Do not be like a horse or mule,
without understanding,
that must be controlled with bit and bridle
or else it will not come near you.
¹⁰ Many pains come to the wicked,
but the one who trusts in the Lord
will have faithful love surrounding him.
¹¹ Be glad in the Lord and rejoice,
you righteous ones;
shout for joy,
all you upright in heart.

Leader: These are David's Words of Gratitude to God. All: Thanks be to God!

Matthew 4:1-11 (NLT)

The Temptation of Jesus

¹ Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil. ² For forty days and forty nights he fasted and became very hungry.

³ During that time the devil came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread.”

⁴ But Jesus told him, “No! The Scriptures say,

‘People do not live by bread alone,

but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city, Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple, ⁶ and said, “If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say,

‘He will order his angels to protect you.

And they will hold you up with their hands

so you won’t even hurt your foot on a stone.’”

⁷ Jesus responded, “The Scriptures also say, ‘You must not test the Lord your God.’”

⁸ Next the devil took him to the peak of a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. ⁹ “I will give it all to you,” he said, “if you will kneel down and worship me.”

¹⁰ “Get out of here, Satan,” Jesus told him. “For the Scriptures say,

‘You must worship the Lord your God

and serve only him.’”

¹¹ Then the devil went away, and angels came and took care of Jesus.

Leader: These are the Words of Jesus. All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Creator God, temptation is a challenging topic, so thank you for the Scriptures to remind us of your love and forgiveness when we sin. Help us to remember to turn toward your word when we have choices to make, both easy ones and difficult ones. Your presence is more important than material wealth or power. As we enter Lent, help us to apply these lessons to our lives and continue to direct our steps personally and as a congregation. Be with those who could not be here, and please speak through me this morning. Amen.

The common thread of our two readings may seem like my sermon title, “Temptation and Forgiveness”, but the essential shared context is having an intimate relationship with God, a relationship so close that even temptation cannot divide. Lent is a time of preparation and reflection forty days before Holy Week; it mirrors Christ’s forty days of fasting in the desert, the setting of our second reading.

Psalm 32 is one of thanksgiving, written by King David who experiences God's forgiveness after adultery with Bathsheba. Psalm 51 is

his prayer asking forgiveness, while this psalm read today is more like a testimony and reflection. David warns that while living in sin, one becomes weak with a guilty conscience heavy enough to make one ill. Sin is willful disobedience, but if a person repents and seeks forgiveness by trusting in God, then the Lord will protect one from trouble. David demonstrates last week's lesson about teaching ourselves before we can teach others. He has learned a valuable lesson from his own temptation that he wishes to teach others: be obedient to God's laws and do not be stubborn like a mule or a horse that needs controlling with a bridle (vs 9).

This was a favorite psalm of 4th century theologian St. Augustine and Isaack Walton, the seventeenth century environmentalist, for its poetry of pardon, cleansing, and making a man or place brand new. The language of verse 4 in other translations is clearly speaking of the deadly summer drought that occurs in the Judean desert while verse 6 refers to the great winter floods that threaten the valleys as the rains gush down the "wadi," which is a valley, ravine, or channel that is dry except in the rainy season. You can see by the top bulletin photo that I took on our four wheeling expedition how dry the desert mountains are; can't you just imagine the destruction and flooding in the lower valleys? David uses this realistic and poetic imagery of a great flood of rushing trouble drowning the sinner if they do not ask for forgiveness. It spoke to the Jews in a metaphor that the guilt of temptation dries up the spirit (like summer heat) while the punishment would be like a gushing wadi; his point is that one can be spared this type of "death" and separation because of God's forgiveness and love. David calls for honesty and obedience, or persons will find themselves in moral dilemmas.

Satan offered Jesus three temptations while he was in the same desert David wrote about. After Jesus' baptism and affirmation in the Jordan River, the Spirit of God led him out into the desert to be tested. The desert was a chance for Jesus (in human form) to search his own heart, having been declared God's beloved son and ordained to serve. He fasted there 40 days as he contemplated his "ordination," if you will. These tests were not about sin for Jesus could not sin but were more about **endurance** during times of temptation. He would need endurance later for the cross, certainly.

There were three tests: 1.) Satan challenged him to be independent from God and feed himself by turning the desert stones to bread. 2.) Nothing could harm Jesus with God's angels looking after him, so Satan took him up to what is today Palestinian Mount Quruntul overlooking Jerusalem and the Jericho valley in the West Bank and said jump! The angels will save you, but Jesus said it was not appropriate to test God. 3.) Satan appealed to human nature's ambition, offering Jesus all the power and splendors of the kingdom he could ever desire, as shown in the bottom bulletin photo of the lush valley below. That photo was from Mount Carmel's monastery rooftop terrace because tensions did not allow us into Jericho the last few days. These three temptations are like the serpent's offers to Eve who did succumb. Had Jesus given in, then God's whole redemptive plan of salvation for humankind would have been sabotaged.

Since it is Lent, let us ask ourselves what is temptation for us? This is not a sermon of condemnation, but we should realize that temptation is a fork in the road, a chance to choose between two options: the power of

God through our relationship with him or the power of evil through separation from him. Jesus faced a true wilderness desert with venomous snakes, predatory animals like leopards, insects like scorpions and poisonous spiders, bats, and no water or food. What is your wilderness? Is it your past? Is it your busy calendar? Loneliness? Overeating, sleeping, spending or addictions? Some may seem harmless, but anything that keeps us away from God's love and word are temptations. Discernment means decision making or choosing action over inaction; exercise over watching TV; comfort over discomfort of conflict resolution; a dry, inhospitable desert or a lush fertile valley. Even for Jesus, his temptation did not end with this passage. This was the beginning of his ministry. He was perfect and without sin, yet he was still tempted.

Part of our Lenten journey must be to acknowledge that yes, we are saved and baptized, but like Jesus, we are vulnerable to temptation, sometimes taking the easy way out. Discernment and choice are not always so simple. The remedy is to draw close enough to God's word and his presence that we can be more like Jesus against evil. He said three times to the three temptations: "The Scriptures say . . ." or in other translations, "It is written that . . ." to defeat evil. First, he knew God's word by memory. Second, he understood that God's power came through his word. Third, Jesus' power came from proclamation of God's word. Do we get that?

Considering our message, how much extra time can you add during Lent and maybe forever to study God's word? 10 minutes, 20, a half-hour? Please think about how you currently cope with temptation and how intimate a relationship you have with God. Are you more like

David's lessons learned, asking often for forgiveness, or more like Jesus, choosing God's direction first and only through his word, the Scriptures? I ask that as we discern our divine experiments this year that these comments be at the core of our choices. Amen. ||

Will you pray with me? Creator God, help us to stay closer to you in all our plans and divine experiments. We know you are working here in our church, our mission center, and our community. Let us work beside you, demonstrating to others your love, care, and forgiveness. Do not tempt us to take the easy road or one that serves us. Let us take the fork that serves you and your kingdom. Help us to be more obedient and trusting. Inspire us and equip us. In Jesus' name, we pray, **Amen.**