

Our New Testament reading this morning comes from Matthew's gospel and tells the story of Jesus' time in the wilderness and his encounter with the devil.

This story is told in both Luke's and Matthew's gospel in almost the same words.

Mark's gospel limits the account to two verses and John does not include it at all.

In later writings, James will say *Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.*

Hear now a reading from the book of Matthew 4:1-11.

Here ends the reading of God's holy word. May He add to our hearing and understanding his blessing. Amen.

Please pray with me.

God of mercy, your word was the sure defense of Jesus in his

time of testing.

Minister to us in the wilderness of our temptation, that we who have been set free from sin by Christ may serve you well into life everlasting.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Amen.

Sermon

I've been reading C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* published in 1941.

The Screwtape Letters comprise 31 letters written by a senior demon named Screwtape to his nephew, Wormwood a younger and less experienced demon, charged with guiding a man (called "the patient") toward "Our Father Below" (Devil / Satan) from "the Enemy" (God).

Wormwood is depicted through Screwtape's letters as anxious to

tempt his patient into extravagantly wicked and deplorable sins, often recklessly, while Screwtape takes a more subtle stance.

In Letter XII Screwtape suggests: "... the safest road to hell is the gradual one - the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts."

Sometimes it is easier to confront evil if we personify it in some way.

For centuries the image of the devil has provided a conceptualization of how humans are led astray.

It gives us someone to blame – ‘the devil made me do it’ but it also gives us someone to watch out for.

If evil comes in concrete forms, we ought to be able to recognize it in our midst.

As we listen this morning to the tales of temptation of Adam and Eve and Jesus we ask ourselves, *Who are the serpents in*

our own lives? Whose voice whispers in our ear granting permission to do what we know we ought not do?

Adam and Eve were well aware of the rules God had set down for them.

We don't have any idea how long they enjoyed life in the garden...it seems brief from the way the story is told.

The serpent – “more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made” – waited for his moment and pounced.

With an enticing proposition of power and knowledge he undermined Eve's resolve and convinced her that she was entitled to eat of the forbidden fruit.

Entitlement is one of the devil's most subtle and frequent ploys.

Jesus, on the other hand, was equally tempted – perhaps even more so—but he resisted strongly enough that Satan left him alone for a while.

The devil doesn't like to waste his time.

The temptations of Jesus are no different than those we face today: power, prestige, independence.

Billy Graham said, "The devil doesn't need to invent any new temptations; the old ones work as well as they ever have."

My friends, this is the human story.

Much of our ability to resist temptation, to say 'no' to offers to turn away from God, comes from our own sense of well-being.

When we feel strong in our beliefs; when we trust that God will not forsake us; it is then that we can stand up to evil.

But when we are weak, when we are tired, when we are restless, when we start to feel diminished or oppressed, evil will seep into the cracks of our resolve.

Serpents wait for opportunities.

The way Matthew tells the story Jesus fasted in the wilderness for forty days.

It was at the end of that time that the devil showed up when Jesus

was hungry, lonely and perhaps struggling with self-doubt. The tempter offered food, fame and fortune – all to benefit Jesus himself... just himself.

This is another one of the greatest temptations we face – the selfish desire to make everything right in our lives alone, regardless of the plight of others.

Thomas Long says, "Jesus resisted the temptation to make the gospel too small."

Jesus stood up to the lure of self-preservation recognizing that God's activity in the world was much more expansive than one individual life.

What temptations do we face in our lives today?

Who are the serpents?

One commentator suggested *Temptation Often Comes in the Wake of Commitment*.

Once we have accepted a high challenge and made a great

commitment, there comes the temptation to forsake the cause.

There is always the temptation to give up the commitment to the best and settle for something less.

The long, difficult journey always brings the temptation to give up the painful pilgrimage to paradise.

We compromise our values in the wake of adversity.

We make a decision to retreat or remain passive when we know we ought to be doing something else.

This leads to another great tool of the devil in our culture – apathy.

I can hear Screwtape whispering in the ear of Wormwood, “Just tell him what he does doesn’t matter.”

We give up hope.

We stop dreaming.

These are all forces that undermine a life of faith – a life worth

living.

As we enter this season of Lent – a time for self-examination, repentance, and discipline, make a plan.

Take action.

Make a commitment to do something in the next 40 days to make your life or the life of someone else better.

Think of ways you might reclaim your identity as a beloved child of God.

- Sunday morning meditation gives you a chance to be still and listen for God's calling in your life;
- Four Lenten Learning presentations provide an opportunity to explore who we are as a church and what we bring to our relationship with God;
- At the Deacon's Dinners we live out the virtue of hospitality, welcoming neighbors and getting to know one another;

- Daily devotions will be provided for you to start your day with a prayer;
- Highlighting Christian Action activities all month offers a glimpse into some of the ways you might put your faith into action.
- Attending Sunday worship throughout Lent prepares your soul for Easter.

All of these strategies are concrete ways that you can strengthen your own ability to stand up to the serpents in your life.

It is a simple and basic message that the Lectionary offers this week.

We are all tempted to go our own way, to ignore God's guidance and direction and to hide our sin and brokenness when we fail.

But, God's gracious and extravagant offer is forgiveness and right relationship with God, guidance and a pathway to life, if we

will only confess our shortcomings and receive God's restoration, and then follow God's ways.

The three sins which have always afflicted human beings – greed for wealth, lust for power and unlimited satisfaction of our appetites also afflicted Christ, and in his overcoming, we find inspiration and guidance for our own lives.

The challenge, in today's world is to have the courage and integrity to acknowledge our brokenness and destructiveness, and admit that we need both forgiveness and empowerment to become creative, contributing human beings who embody God's love.

I am confident that we have the ability to stand up to the serpents. I believe that God created us with the capacity and imagination to outsmart the devil.

God wants what is best for us and for God's created world.

It is up to us to rise to the challenge of ensuring that we recognize

and accept God's abundant grace when it is offered.

Let this Lenten season be the one that turns your life around.

Start now and plan to be a new person on Easter Sunday.

Let us pray.

Gracious and loving God you have created us for your good.

Out of love you breathed us into life and sustain us through trials
and tribulations.

You, O God, sent us the gift of your son, Jesus Christ and
empowered us for service through the Holy Spirit.

We have been nourished at this communion table.

We have feasted on your word and promise.

Empower us this Lenten season to live up to your dream for us.

Help us to resist temptation in all its forms.

Help us, holy one, to reflect your goodness and your love in our
own lives.

Hear our prayers this day for those whom we love.

For those who are sick, we pray for healing.

For those who mourn we pray for comfort.

For our brothers and sisters who wander the earth searching for a place to call home, we pray that your Holy Spirit will guide them to a place of peace.

We pray for our leaders that their hearts might be filled with compassion.

We pray for the earth that you created and charged us to tend, that we might save her from destruction and restore her to the original garden you designed.

O God, hear our prayers this morning as we turn our hearts to you in the sacred silence of this meeting house...

Jesus taught his disciples to pray in these words...Our Father