

**St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA**  
**The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge**  
**Church Year A**  
**3/5/17**  
**Lent 1**  
**Matthew 4:1-12**

Temptation. An interesting word, “Temptation.” “May I tempt you with a selection from chef’s sinfully delicious dessert menu?” says the smiling waiter as he suavely slips the dessert card under your nose. “Why of course you may,” you say to yourself, even though you have just completed two very filling courses. You know you shouldn’t, but you know you want to. Or how about Girl Scout cookies? Now, I look forward every year to seeing our wonderful Girl Scouts here at St. Thomas roaming the Great Hall at Coffee Hour in their uniforms and carrying their bags laden with Thin Mints and other temptations. I tell myself that I buy cookies every year because I want to support our Girl Scouts and their mission – I really do – but, ah, the Thin Mints – I know I shouldn’t, but I know I want to. Now Lay’s Potato chips I can take or leave. But I’ll tell you this about Thin Mints, you can’t eat just one. Or just two, or just three – right?

There are lots of important little slippery-slope lessons to be learned here. For example, I recently learned from a physician that our brains and our bodies are a little out of sync when it comes to hunger. Your body will know that you have eaten enough before your brain knows by about 20 minutes. That’s why I want those extra 3 or 4 or 5 Thin Mints. My brain is remembering how good the first two tasted, at the same time my body knows it’s satiated. So when I take a deep breath, and resist the temptation to dip back into the box, pretty shortly, the want for that extra ration of Thin Mints has passed.

Is it Satan standing on my left shoulder, whispering in my ear, “Go ahead, you know you want to, a few more won’t hurt?” Who knows? But it sure does feel like it sometimes. And of course we all have our own versions, in fact many versions, of this trivial little story. And many of our stories, including some of my own, aren’t so trivial.

That’s the reason that this beautiful story we read this morning of Jesus’ own temptations in the wilderness ought to be so powerfully resonant for us.

First we want to know that there are two really important stories from the Bible that form the basis for this story. I’ll talk about one of them now and the other one later. When Matthew’s audience first heard this story they would have been immediately reminded of the story of their own people, the people of Israel, whom God freed from slavery in Egypt but then led out into the wilderness for 40 years. 40 years! There they faced many temptations. The temptation to rebellion. The temptation to worship other gods. The temptation to just throw in the towel and head back to captivity in Egypt. Ever wonder why God kept them in the wilderness for 40 years? It’s because it took that long for their characters to be formed. For them to become a unified people and not a rabble. For them to become a people who might thrive in the Promised Land.

Learning to endure the temptation to become their own masters – the temptation to worship at the altar of self-importance – it took a while for those lessons to be learned.

And now Jesus, who has his own lessons to learn – and it's very important for us to take seriously that Jesus was fully human just as we say every time we repeat the Nicene Creed – Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days – there's that number 40 again – where he too is tempted – tempted to be his own master, tempted to worship at the altar of self-importance – tempted to satisfy his immediate needs instead of serving the will of his Father. Now let's step back for a minute and observe something about us human beings of whom Jesus was one. We have three primal basic needs that seem to be hard wired into each and every one of us. We have the need for power and control, for safety and security, for affection and esteem. And we spend a good part of our lives creating strategies to satisfy those needs. We don't trust God's power, we don't trust God to provide for our true security, we don't trust God's unconditional love. So we step into what we perceive to be the breach and try to do it all ourselves. On a macro level this is why we have war and conflict, grinding, inhuman poverty right next to unimaginable wealth, the worship of fame and celebrity and the rejection of humility. On a more personal level, we often try to create bright shining personae to cover up our fears, our insecurities, our anxieties. We hoard rather than share out of fear there won't be enough for us. Too many of us, men and women alike, follow the maxim of poor old Babe Paley who famously said about 50 years ago, "You can't be too thin or too rich." The temptations to all of these behaviors and so many more lead us away from an abundant life with God and God's people and into the land of anxiety and fear. We live in a spiritually famished wilderness and imagine that we can make it out on our own.

Now, remember a little while ago I said there was a second Biblical story that's at work here? It's the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden. We read it this morning. You know it well and you've heard me tell it more than once from this pulpit.

God gave the man and the woman everything they could possibly want and in abundance. Just one overall instruction. Stay away from the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil. That was reserved for God alone. Then on to the scene slithers the wily snake, old Satan himself. "Oh come on," he says to the man and the woman, "don't be such ninnies. Have some of this tasty fruit – and then you will be like God." An amazing temptation to be like God. Who wouldn't jump at the chance! To push God out of the judgement seat and take God's place right there. In the control tower. In charge of everything. I think that tree is more appropriately named the Tree of Self-Importance. Trusting in ourselves to do it all. Pushing God out of the way so we can be in charge. And Satan – Old Scratch himself – laughs and laughs. This is the other story we need to understand when we're thinking about Jesus and Satan alone in the wilderness for 40 days. Now, notice that at the end of these 40 days in the wilderness, Satan isn't laughing at all. In fact, he's vanished. His power has been broken by a human being who is living into his full humanity. His power has been broken by a human being who refuses to succumb to the

temptation to worship at the altar of self-importance. His power has been broken by a human being who has placed his total trust in God's grace and mercy. And in doing that, this human being has also understood his own divine nature. Jesus' character is being forged in this wilderness experience and he is coming to understand the Christ that lives within. His own Christ nature. The indwelling Christ as Scripture puts it. That deep understanding of his Christ nature is how to understand that concluding beautiful image, "...then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him."

And of course Jesus is showing us here the pattern for our own lives. That's why we call him our Savior. The temptations we confront every day, both large and small, are really grounded in these primal human needs for power and control, safety and security, affection and esteem. And the way forward when we confront our temptations, whether it's to reach for just one more Thin Mint or to reject our neighbor because they don't share the same skin color or religious traditions as ours, or the temptation to return violence for violence, is not so much to simply say "no" as it is to say "yes," to something else. To say "yes" to something larger than our own egoic desires. To say "yes" to God. To trust, that is to say, that God's will for my life and for your life leads to health and healing and wholeness. As Jesus later said in his beautiful prayer in Gethsemane on the last night of his life, "Not that my will but yours be done." There's the key. There's the pattern. There's the way forward. Saying "yes" to God's will. Worshipping at God's altar and not the altar of self-importance.

It's now Lent. Each Sunday in Lent we'll say our Baptismal Covenant. It includes the Nicene Creed and includes our five baptismal promises. There's one I want to focus on right now.

"Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord."

It really does take perseverance. Patience. Courage. Interior strength. And there's realism here. We aren't perfect. We'll screw up. We'll act and think and behave at times that give into temptation. But when that happens, and indeed it will, stop, recognize it, confront it, and then "turn around." That's literally what "repent" means. Turn around. Return. Every act of repentance, every time we acknowledge our screw-ups, large and small, and turn around, brings us one step closer to our own Christ nature, our own inner divinity – which is really our true humanity as well.

Satan will keep showing up. Oh, yes, he will. He's a sly fox. But when he does, tell him to go to hell. And then turn around. Say "yes" to God and God's will. And you may just find that angels will be waiting on you. Amen.