

Years ago Flip Wilson had a skit in which his "Geraldine" went out and bought herself an expensive dress. When she later modeled the garment, she was told that when tempted to buy it she should have resisted the temptation by saying, "Get thee behind me, Satan!" To which Geraldine replied, "That is what I did say and the Devil told me it looked very nice from the back."¹

We are always being tempted, and there is always someone, or something, that will help us give into temptation. When someone offers me a donut, my first thought is to cry: "Don't tempt me!" Knowing all the reasons to avoid that donut, the huge number of calories and excessive fat grams, doesn't seem to help. There is always that little voice encouraging me to go ahead, I'll work it off on the next bike ride. "Don't tempt me!" The trouble is not in the temptation, or in the donut, it is in my ability, or inability, to say: "No!"

This is the first Sunday in our Lenten journey to the cross. This is a tour in which we will see many different sights, be confronted with thought provoking challenges, have opportunities to contemplate where we have been and where we are going. We will observe loving and gentle scenes, incredible celebrations, awesome feats of faith, horrible acts of inhumanity. We will be traveling together; however, this is predominately an individual journey of discovery. Hopefully, by the end of our journey we will have discovered new meaning in following Jesus to the cross, in being called a Christian.

Look around you at your traveling companions. Go ahead, take a look at God's People. Is there someone who should not be on this journey to the cross? I hope not. No one is so perfect as to not need to take this trip. Just as importantly, no one so bad that they are not welcome to come along. Notice someone missing? Its not too late to invite them along; there is never a better time to join the journey than during Lent. Our tour guide, Jesus of Nazareth, welcomes all: this is a journey for all of God's people.

¹ R. Maurice Boyd, *Why Doesn't God Do Things Perfectly?*, Abingdon Press, 1999, pp. 114-115.

This week, we focus on one group of God's people and our final destination as we look at the temptation of Jesus. Matthew tells us that after Jesus was baptized, the Spirit took Jesus into the desert where he fasted for 40 days; an echo of the 40 years spent in the wilderness by Israel after fleeing captivity in Egypt.

The modern tradition of Lent found its duration here: 40 days of fasting broken only by the intervening Sundays. As a note, there are many types of fasting: fasting from all food, or from certain foods; we can also fast from such things as video games, iPods, or TV shows, even anger. We have the tradition to give up, to fast from, some single item during Lent. If it is something we enjoy and will miss, then as frequently as we think of it we should redirect our thoughts toward God. Its kind of like an infected web browser: every time we click on Donut or Chocolate up pops a page about Jesus!

Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness. Think about that for a moment. Even Jesus was tempted; he did not give in, but he was tempted. Just because we are tempted to do something wrong, something displeasing to God, does not exclude us from God's people. Each of the temptations (food after a long fast, dependence upon God for safety, power to accomplish earthly tasks) sound very reasonable. In fact, none of the temptations themselves offered by the devil were totally wrong or evil.

For many, the idea of the devil is so old fashioned, so, so unenlightened! Personally, I do not believe in some high school mascot: The Red Devil. I do not believe that there is some nefarious bright red creature with a long tale and pointy horns running around with a pitch fork getting us into trouble. I do believe in evil. There have been, still are, absolutely evil people and evil societies. There is a personification of evil, the devil or Satan, that is real. Whether we look for Satan on the street, or in a mirror, does not negate his existence.

Jesus did not give in to temptation. I wish that I could say the same! God knows that we will give into temptation. Jesus lived out God's loving response to those who give in: he ate dinner with them, more accurately, he partied with them! He also taught

them, he walked with them, he healed them. Jesus loved all those who had given in to temptation, and then offered them an alternative. But, I get ahead of our journey.

Before we go further, we ought to talk about our destination: the cross. There are many people who will walk with us toward the cross, but leave the group before we reach it, before the end of our journey.

Some may stop at Palm Sunday, after the festive celebration.

Others might leave the journey at Maundy Thursday. They will leave after they feast with Jesus at the Last Supper. The fellowship is great, being nourished is good. While the food is good, there are some interesting, well, even odd and cryptic remarks made during dinner. But just think, if Jesus had given into the first temptation of the devil, he could have catered the meal himself: turning rocks into bread, perhaps flowers into fruit, desert stones into dessert. Think of the economics - turning wasteland into culinary oases! Catering the rich, feeding the poor, unlimited potential! But Jesus ignored this opportunity. For those who might leave us there, disappointed in the lost opportunities, listen to the words of Jesus to the devil: "Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Stay with us as we see and hear the word of God.

Some will make it as far as Good Friday. But the cross seems like an affront: how can this happen? Why? I did not ask for Jesus to die for me! Why? Why did not God protect Jesus, offer an alternative? Even the devil could quote Scripture: God had promised to send angels to protect Jesus. Jesus rebukes the devil: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test!"

I wish that the cross were not the answer. Surely if we have the power of God on our side nothing bad should happen to us; we can overcome danger, never come to harm, have a guaranteed holy safety net. Jesus, with the devil, and at the cross, trusted God to do what is right. Let us also trust God and accept that God is in control.

My favorite source for humor has always been the Readers Digest. Years ago, it

told of a farming couple, living on a river plain, as a flood came. The county sheriff came to warn them to evacuate, but they replied that they would stay home and pray for safety. As the water rose, friends in a motor boat came by and offered them a ride to safety. Again, they answered that they were praying for safety and God would take care of them. As they sat stranded on their roof surrounded by raging water, a National Guard helicopter came to rescue them. Again, they declined, positive that their prayers for safety would be answered. Shortly thereafter, as they arrived in heaven, they sought out God and asked why God had not answered their prayers for safety. God's reply was: I sent the sheriff, I sent your friends in the boat, I sent the National Guard helicopter, what more did you want?

We shall not put the Lord to the test! We shall see God at work in all things.

Strangely enough, others will leave the group between Good Friday and Easter, Resurrection Sunday. They think that the great rabbi has died. His words live on; they are but a weathered guidepost for our lives. For Jesus, it is over; for us it is a sad and lonely beginning. Think what Jesus could have accomplished with the power of every kingdom under his control! An incredible opportunity for a great and unified kingdom slipped through his fingers. It might have been the end of war, of injustice, of petty tyrants and evil leaders. The loss of power, the loss of his life, will cause many to turn away in sadness, even disillusionment.

To them, the words of Jesus demand: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only." Yes, we can still worship God if we leave before Resurrection Sunday. However, we would only worship good words, an exemplary life. Just like none of those earthly kingdoms still exist, it would be hard to comprehend that we would even remember those words of a man upon the cross. We could try to worship God, follow God, based on our own strength. Let us instead finish the journey, move beyond the cross, and worship the Risen Lord God, victorious over death, who offers us power and strength beyond imagination and these earthly kingdoms.

What do we learn from this first stop along the way? What does Jesus tell us that we need to know for the trip ahead? First, let the Holy Spirit lead you. It was the Holy Spirit who led Jesus into the desert, it was the Spirit that gave Jesus the strength and the discernment to challenge the devil. We should seek the Holy Spirit of God as our guide; then we should follow where the Spirit leads us, drawing upon the Spirit's strength. Second, know Scripture. Not only could Jesus quote Scripture, challenge the devil verse by verse, but Jesus also knew those great themes that lie within Scripture. The Word of God, written in Scripture, the Word of God brought alive in Jesus, still teaches us how to cope with evil, how to worship God alone. The Word of God helps us through difficulty; the devil still flees from it. But we must know the Word of God - study it this Lent. Let it give us the ability to say "No!" to temptation.

This is a great journey for all of God's people. God's people are and will be tempted; yet we remain God's people. This is the first of many places and words and actions that will guide us throughout our journey. Please stay with the group until the final destination as we let Jesus guide us to, and beyond, the cross.