

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

February 26, 2023 – LENT I, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Sin—I Did it My Way*”\*

Genesis 2:15–17; 3:1–7 (Mankind fell into sin and mortality, through pride)  
Psalm 32 (God forgives the sins of those who acknowledge their guilt)  
Romans 5:12–19 (As Adam brought sin, so Christ brings salvation)  
St. Matthew 4:1–11 (Jesus is tempted by the devil—and conquers the evil one)

---

“I generally avoid temptation ... unless I can’t resist it,” purred the sultry actress, Mae West.<sup>1</sup> And noted science fiction author, Robert A. Heinlein, wrote: “Yield to temptation. It may not pass your way again.”<sup>2</sup> Their views of temptation are at odds with today’s Gospel lesson.

A different perspective was offered by the famous 19<sup>th</sup>-century preacher, Henry Ward Beecher. He wrote: “All men are tempted. There is no man that lives that can’t be broken down, provided it is the right temptation, put in the right spot.”<sup>3</sup> If you read his biography, you will know whereof he speaks. The liberal clergyman was repeatedly suspected of several extramarital affairs, and was eventually put on trial for charges of adultery.<sup>4</sup> A more amusing take on this age-old problem was offered by humorist Jane Seabrook, who quipped, “Lead me not into temptation—I can find the way myself.”<sup>5</sup>

St. Paul understood exactly what Beecher and Seabrook were talking about. In Romans 7:18-24, in “The Message” translation, the apostle addresses his own penchant for sin: “I know the law but still can’t keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don’t have what it takes. I can will it, but I can’t *do* it. I decide to do good, but I don’t *really* do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don’t result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time. It happens so regularly that it’s predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God’s commands, but it’s pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge. I’ve tried everything and nothing helps. I’m at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me?”

If even an influential Christian minister and the world’s greatest apostle and saint struggled with temptation, what makes us think we are immune to it? Blaise Pascal, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Christian philosopher, wrote: “There are only two kinds of people, the righteous who believe themselves a sinner, and the sinner who believe themselves righteous.” Either way, we are mistaken. For the Bible tells us in Romans 3:23 (NLT): “Everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard.” [Emphasis added.]

We know this. If we are honest with ourselves, every one of us struggles with some form of temptation, whether it’s food we shouldn’t eat; thoughts we know are morally wrong; substances we abuse; hurtful or untrue words we can’t seem to stop saying; giving in too easily to selfish desires; turning a blind eye to injustice or suffering; or any number of other secret habits, addictions, or failures about which only God knows. From our Prayer Book’s Confession, we know that sin is both “what we have done, and what we have left undone.”

In the scheme of life, we sin not only against other people, or against Creation when we are not good stewards of it, but ultimately, we sin against God Himself. In his Lenten devotional, Rejoice and Realize, Richard Hoefler observes: “When we sin we do not break a law; we break our Father’s heart. God grieves when we sin against him, but he does not disown us.”<sup>6</sup>

Fortunately, nothing we ever do, or fail to do, can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. But it is because we are so greatly loved, that the temptation to sin against God and our neighbor should give us pause. In life, we try not to cause grief, pain, or regret to people we love. Just so, when we truly love God, we don't want to break His heart, either.

In today's Gospel lesson, the temptation of Christ gives us a clear picture of the love God has for us as we face the dark challenges of this world. In Jesus' desert experience, we see that God understands, and sympathizes with, the human condition in which we live. We live in a fallen world, surrounded by brokenness and evil. That is why God allowed His Only Son to endure loneliness, hunger, temptation, and possibly even despair, so that He would know from the inside-out the difficulties we face daily.

Even so, the story of Christ's temptation may seem far removed from our current personal and cultural context. You may have trouble relating to enticements such as turning stones into bread; jumping off the pinnacle of the Temple so God's angels can catch you; or being placed on a high mountain to see the riches and glories of the whole world, as the Devil gives you a chance to own it all. (Actually, that sounds like one of those "reality" TV shows.) Jesus' temptations can seem too remote from the complex transgressions that beset us in our postmodern, electronic, comfortable lives.

However, all three temptations which Christ faced are indicative of the way Satan, in his craftiness, still tries to bring us down today. So let's look at how they work: The first temptation speaks of turning stones into bread. As Jesus sits alone in the desert, his stomach empty, his throat parched, after fasting for 40 days, the devil appears. Not as some red-horned guy with a pitchfork, but more as a subtle, inventive, suggestion that sounds like the voice of reason: "Oh, Jesus, you seem to be having a rough time. By the way, you are the Son of God, aren't you? So, why don't you turn these stones into bread? Not just for yourself—you who are so loving and compassionate—but for all the starving people of the world. They need this food. They need the power you possess. Give them what they want and they will follow you anywhere." That doesn't sound so diabolical, does it? Feed yourself. Feed the world. Take care of the hungry. What a noble cause!

This temptation wasn't so much about the act, as it was about the motivation. The temptation was to take a short cut, take the easy way out, to bypass God's ability to provide through natural means. Instead of growing and processing food, just snap your fingers, and *poof!* there it is. That is the essence of each of the three temptations: To short-circuit God's plan, purposes, and order in life. Turn stones into bread (after all, Satan already knows Jesus will turn water into wine); jump off the temple and dare angels to catch you; become the ruler of the world—bring peace, justice, and love!

All of this sounds good, but each scenario leaves God out of the picture. And leaving God out of the picture is what sin is all about. When we look at it this way, the temptations of Jesus are not so far removed from our own lives. We want to control things so as to determine the outcomes around us. Smug in our own sinful pride, we play games with each other and with God, pretending that we are not as flawed, as unrighteous, or as unholy as that *other person* at whom we so readily point a finger.

Basically, the Devil is saying to Jesus: "Live life on your terms! Do it your own way!" This is a mantra that has become a byword in our society. We hear it echoed in the fast-food vendor's slogan, "Have it your way!" Or, in Frank Sinatra's hit song, "I did it my way." Yes, we'd all like to have life on our own terms. To be able to run everything, so as to obtain the results we desire. But as soon as we go in that direction, we begin to push God out of the picture.

St. Paul reminds us of this when he writes: "I don't accomplish the good things that I set out to do, and the evil things that I don't want to do, I find I'm always doing." How could we even hope to control *anything else*, when we can't even control our own personal desires, thoughts, and words?

In today's Gospel, Our Lord challenges us to stop trying to run our lives our own way. Rather, He calls us to turn them over to God 100 percent, inviting the renewing presence of the Holy Spirit to fill our lives, and allowing Christ Himself to be poured into our hearts. Part of how we do this is by adopting the same tactics Jesus chose to fight the Devil: Having a thorough knowledge of Holy Scripture. Jesus responded to each of Satan's temptations with a quotation from the Book of Deuteronomy that he had memorized.

In other words, when you make a decision, or any choice at all, how might things end differently if you first asked yourself, "What does the Bible say about this?" or, "How would God want me to act in this situation?" Of course, there are times when we know perfectly well that we are about to commit sin, and like St. Paul we just can't stop ourselves.

That's where repentance and forgiveness come in. Jesus taught Peter that he must forgive others "70 times 7," as a way of illustrating that God's mercy is beyond our ability to quantify. We heard in today's Psalm that the Lord has mercy on all who acknowledge their sins before Him. Thanks be to God!

Lent is a season in which we are offered an extended time for such self-examination, repentance, and returning to the Lord. May God grant us the grace to do these things. And in doing them, may we experience His peace and blessing. This we ask in His Holy name. *Amen.*

---

\* Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 5 March 2017, St. John's Church, Compass, PA. Used with permission.

<sup>1</sup> "Temptation," [Goodreads.com](https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/temptation) < <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/temptation> > 17 February 2023.

<sup>2</sup> "Temptation," [Brainyquote.com](https://www.brainyquote.com/topics/temptation#K1rkjaQ4ByhbYlhu.99) < <https://www.brainyquote.com/topics/temptation#K1rkjaQ4ByhbYlhu.99> > 17 February 2023.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> "Henry Ward Beecher," [Wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Ward_Beecher), 27 January 2034 < [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry\\_Ward\\_Beecher](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Ward_Beecher) > 17 February 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Jane Seabrook, [Furry Logic of Life](#), qtd. "Temptation," [Goodreads.com](https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/temptation) < <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/temptation> > 17 February 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Hoefler, [Rejoice and Realize](#), qtd. Tim Zingale, "Temptation," 11 February 2002, [Sermon Central.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/temptation-tim-zingale-sermon-on-church-discipline-43312?page=1&wc=800) < <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/temptation-tim-zingale-sermon-on-church-discipline-43312?page=1&wc=800> > 17 February 2023. Used with permission.