

Clip from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wWW1vpz1ybo&feature=related>

Anyone relate to those poor kids?! The point of the exercise was to see whether the children could delay gratification or not.

We tend to think of temptation like those kids trying their best not to eat that marshmallow. Avoiding temptation seems to equate with willpower and the ability to avoid temptation indicates greater willpower. And giving into temptation often makes us feel like failures.

Our gospel story tells of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness and when we dig into his story, we see that temptation is really about more than strength or failure and it's about way more than just avoiding the goodies we want but feel we ought not have.

Jesus has just been baptized—graced with the power of the Spirit and God's voice calling from the heavens and claiming him as God's own. In fact, as the Spirit hustles him off to the desert you can practically see the baptismal waters still spraying off of him.

But that desert heat dries him off pretty darn quickly, and then it just a struggle. A struggle with hunger as he goes without for forty days and a struggle with the devil—the ultimate tempter.

The devil's temptations don't come at him when he is at his peak, when he is brimming with all possible powers, when he is most well positioned to fend them off. The devil's temptations come at him when he is famished. When his stomach aches from emptiness, when he is so fatigued he likely is not entirely sure where he is or what he's supposed to be doing. The devil's temptations come to him in a time of great weakness.

The devil's temptations don't come to a place where Jesus will be surrounded by family and friends. They don't come in a familiar setting with the comforts of home. The devil's temptations come as Jesus is in the wilderness. The wilderness, which in scripture is code for alone, abandoned, despairing. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says in his essay on temptation, "...temptation does not begin with the Father equipping the Son with every power and every weapon, in order that he might be victorious in the struggle; but the Spirit leads Jesus in to the wilderness, into solitude, into abandonment.

And the temptations themselves. The devil doesn't tempt Jesus with a few extra calories, or with a luscious-looking chocolate, or a tall slice of coconut cr me pie, or a second or third glass of wine. No, the temptations the devil offers are not so prosaic, and not nearly so obvious.

First the devil tempts Jesus by using his hunger against him—turning his very weakness into a source of testing. “If you're the son of God turn these stones into bread...” I don't know about you, but I hear the dare in that. C'mon Jesus, you can do it... and think how hungry you are.” The devil tempts Jesus in his flesh—in his very humanity—in the midst of his need.

Then the devil tempts Jesus in his allegiance to God. He shows him all the kingdoms of the world and tells Jesus they can all be his...oh, and there's just this one thing—just this small print down here, hardly noticeable, hardly important.. you just have to worship me. The temptation is to worship something—or someone—other than God. But look at the reward! Power, glory, honor!!

Finally, the devil tempts Jesus in his spirit. The devil says, essentially, “show me that God really cares about you, prove it. C'mon, you know God'll save you. The devil tempts Jesus to doubt—if only for a moment. And maybe for Jesus a little double check after these forty days of hunger, isolation and poor company seems like it might be in order.

Jesus, in the wilderness, in the flesh, suffering the temptations of the devil—the same temptations—in fact—that we experience—each day, all our lives. That's part of the deal after all, that whole coming-in-the-flesh thing. That Jesus would know our struggles, know our sufferings, know our temptations. God so loved us that God experienced in Jesus Christ the fullness of what it is to be human.

And the temptations that Jesus experienced are our temptations. Not simple excesses that we know we should say no to, but fundamental temptations that meet us where we live. Challenges that come to us in our weakness, in moments when we are at our lowest, when we are short on reserves, isolated and feeling alone. Temptations of the flesh, temptations that challenge our allegiance to God, temptations of our very spirit.

We are tempted in the midst of our hungers, physical and otherwise. Everything in our world and in our culture tells us we don't have to be hungry, we don't have to go without, we don't have to suffer. We get to thinking that everything is supposed to go our way and that any experience outside that is wrong somehow. We ask ourselves, why has this happened to me? As if we think that we should somehow be immune from struggle, from suffering, from want. The

tempter comes in a voice inside that tells us that if we want something then we need it. That if we want something, then we really ought to have it. The tempter is the voice that says that “like it, love it, gotta have it.

We are tempted to worship that which is not God. Whether it’s our social position, whether it’s our roster of friendships, whether it’s the lineup of new technology that we have or seek to have. Whether it’s our role as parent, whether its our career, whether its our lifestyle. Whatever it is that gets between us and God, that’s our god—and that’s what we worship. And the tempter is the voice, in our head, in the world, on the TV, from the mouths of those around us, that says that’s ok, don’t worry, just don’t look at the fine print.

And we are tempted in our spirit—tempted to doubt God and all God has done for us. We say, if there really were a God then God would have done this, or that, or the other thing. If God really cared then God wouldn’t let these kinds of things happen. As if we know how God should work, or what God has actually even done. As if we have any ability to measure, assess and test God’s efforts. Certainly there are tough things that happen in our lives and in the world—and we struggle to understand why those things happen. But it’s the tempter’s voice that whispers to us, “Shouldn’t God have done something different here...?” “Where was God anyway?” “Maybe it’s time you turned your attention elsewhere.”

And all of these temptations add up to one thing. As Bonhoeffer says, “Satan does not here fill us with hatred of God, but with forgetfulness of God.”

Forgetfulness of God.

In all these temptations, we are called to forget God. To forget all that God has done for us, to forget God as the source of our being and the ground of all our hopes. To forget God’s love for us, God’s strength in us, God’s righteousness for us.

Forgetfulness of God.

What’s worse, to be hated, or to be forgotten?

And these temptations come to us, not in our strength, but in our absolute weakness. So we’re not going to be able to turn away through strength. In fact, the truth is, there is no power of our own that will keep us from temptation, no ability that will enable us to turn back to God—to remember God again. In the end, we’ve got nothing. No strength, no hope, no power, not any of our own resources.

*All* we have is the word of God. Which is what Jesus shows us after all. He doesn't resist the tempter by fighting, by resisting, by arguing. He resists with the word of God, against which the devil has no counter-offensive.

Earlier this week, Vali Potter was packing Ben up for some time at his grandmother's when he was sick. As she was bustling around, getting ready to go, she asked him "Have you got books and videos and stuff to pass the time? Ben, his bag already packed, said, "I've got a book." He'd packed his brand-new second-grade bible. They played cards and watched the Olympics for a while and then grandma said, "Let's sit on the couch and you can read to me." Ben showed her where he had already read the book of Esther, then he decided he should start at the beginning, so he'd read her a paragraph and then ask to talk about it and then read another paragraph and so on.

Ben's got his bible and is reading God's word—which is a pretty good defense against the work of the devil.

And in a little bit we're going to give our 2-year-olds prayer pillows. Pillows that were made with love by the women of this congregation. Pillows that will remind these two-year-olds and us, that prayer—listening for God's word—is a pretty good defense against the work of the devil.

And still later in the service we're going to share in the meal together. The bread and wine, which when combined with God's word, become Jesus present with us. Jesus' real presence—in food that nourishes us from the inside out, an excellent defense against the work of the devil.

God is here, God is with us, and in the midst of our weakness, God will give us all we need for the business of remembering. God's word will help us Remember God, remember God's love, remember God's constant presence and remember God's promise to with us always, even to the end of the age.