

1 March 2020
First Sunday of Lent
Genesis 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

A good habit that I formed this Fall while I was on sabbatical was **“going to the gym.”** I tried to give it a good hour every other day, some exercises, then at least a half hour of cardio, usually on an elliptical machine. So, when I came back, so that all my time away would not be in vain, I joined a gym.

I don't like going to the gym. I like having been to the gym, but I don't like going and I don't like being there all that much either. Gym culture is interesting. Unless people go with a friend, there's not much banter. People pretty much keep to themselves. But lately, **I've been asking, “Do you like coming to the gym?”** I thought people would say, “Yes, it really pumps me up!” and such things. But, it turns out, **most people are like me. “It's hard getting off the couch,” they say, “but I feel good after.”**

So, it seems like “going to the gym” is a classic case of the conflict between our rational long-term good versus the feelings of the present moment. In the big picture of our health, it makes sense to go. In the short term, at the end of the day, we feel better about ourselves knowing we had been to the gym...so, it makes sense to go. It would be a mistake to base the choice on whether or not to go on the feelings of the moment, right? And yet we tell ourselves, “You don't have to go. You're comfortable and warm right now, why leave the house? You can go tomorrow.”

And isn't that what the voice of the Tempter does? The serpent to Eve or Satan to Jesus. **The Tempter clouds our judgment, making us forget about long-term rewards in favor of the pleasure of now.** We lose track of the fact that making a bright future possible most often means sacrifices in the present. Jesus withstood Satan not so much because he was God but because he stayed focused on the end goal of his life: he would remain empty, he would not elevate himself, and he would follow only the leading voice of God the Father. Anything else would sidetrack him from his mission.

Another light example: When I was in campus ministry at UW-Stout, we had **an overnight service trip to the Cities, and at that time the film *A Beautiful Mind***, a film that was destined to become one of my very favorites of all time, was playing. I suggested that the group of us go and see it. **The other older person who went on the trip, however, said she did not want to go.** I asked why, because I really wanted to go. She said that **her husband was a math professor, and that the film was about a math professor and so she wanted to see it with him first.** But I really wanted to go. So, **I said things like, “Well, let's just go and you don't have to tell him you saw it!”** Or, “He won't mind!” **I didn't think of myself as being the serpent in the Garden of Eden or the Evil Tempter in Jesus' wilderness, but I see now that I basically was.** The good news was that the tempter, I, was frustrated because my colleague stayed firm and refused to go out of love for her husband. She had no trouble putting principle and long term happiness above the pleasure of the moment. A good woman. A good person.

Usually, when I hear these readings, I put myself in the place of the one being tempted and try to gain the strength of Jesus and resist. **Sometimes, though, we are the tempter,** trying to pull away a person from the right path. **Do any instances of you being the Tempter come to mind? Do you ever try to get someone to do something that's wrong because it will help you in some way? Or perhaps more insidiously,** have you ever tried to get someone to do something that wasn't right maybe because you resented their virtue because it made you look bad by comparison, and so you wanted to drag them to your level? **Maybe you haven't, or maybe you do it often but don't realize it.**

We're here together now. This **gathering in church is really a microcosm of what our lives are all about. We are a People of God on a pilgrim journey from God and to God. The presence of each one of you here supports the journey of all the rest of us.** I remember a scene from the film *Glengarry Glenross* when salesman played by Al Pacino lays into the sales and office manager played by Kevin Spacey for interfering with their job. In a rage, he stares the incompetent manager in the face and says, "You are our manager. **You are supposed to HELP us, not MESS US UP!**"

I could say the same to all of us (and you to me). *You are part of the Body of Christ*, beloved by God. We all face temptations and need to strength of Christ's example, yes, but also the examples of one another. **We are supposed to Help each other, not mess each other up! Thank you for being here. Your presence here helps me. I hope my presence here helps you.**