

Wesley United Methodist Church

February 22, 2015

"Wrestling with Temptation"

Mark 1:9-13

A kindergarten teacher was suddenly taken ill and a replacement was quickly found. The substitute teacher was at a loss as to what to do with the children. She decided to tell them stories. And always, at the end of each story, she would say, "And the moral of the story is..."

After dozens of stories, the children had sat through dozens of morals. The regular teacher recovered from her illness and returned to her class. One of the students greeted her with a smile and said, "Teacher, I'm sure glad you're back. I like you better than the other teacher."

The teacher was flattered, but curious. "Why do you like me better than that other teacher?"

The child looked into the teacher's eyes and said, "Because you don't have any morals."

We may not end every story we tell with the words, "And the moral of the story is..." but everyone of us who has gathered here this morning has morals, I hope... We wouldn't be here if we didn't. It's part of what calls us and draws us together. And we learned those morals from our parents and teachers but especially from our relationship with Christ.

Yet, even though we have morals, every single one of those morals are challenged. Every single day, we step into the wrestling ring of life and struggle with living up to those morals and the relationship with God which those morals represent.

Since it is the season of High school wrestling, I am going to talk about wrestling a bit. Jesus wrestled with temptation every single day of his ministry. Today we read in Mark about one of those wrestling matches. Jesus wrestled with temptation. Verses twelve and thirteen of our text tell us, "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."

Jesus wrestled with temptation. Mark doesn't go into the detail the other Gospels do, but we know one thing, Jesus overcame temptation. He was able to say "No" to temptation and "Yes" to God.

We at times talk about the seven deadly sins. They can be the real temptation. Do you know the list?

Lust: that craving for the pleasures of the body and the overwhelming desire to possess whether it's a thing or a person.

Anger: which causes us to lose control. It not only smothers love but spurns love and lets fury reign.

Greed: that desire for materiel wealth and gain at the cost of ignoring the realm of the spiritual.

Sloth: that self centered aspect of life that says: "I don't have to do anything if I don't want to."

Envy: the desire for the traits, status, or abilities of another. We call it jealousy, it doesn't rejoice in the blessings of others. It curses their good fortune because it didn't happen to the envious person.

Gluttony: the craving and desire to consume more than is needed or required. It's pulling the stool up to the buffet and eating because it's there and you want to get as much as you can.

Pride: the excessive belief in one's own abilities that interferes with the individual's recognition of the grace of God. It has been called the sin from which all others arise. Pride is also known as vanity.

What we need to realize is that those temptations don't just happen. They don't just suddenly show up and move in. They don't swoop down and invade. They are the ongoing temptations of everyday life. We face them every single day. They are wooing and calling us. Waiting for just one small invitation. And once the door's open, they move in and take up residence like a destitute relative who won't help themselves or move out and move on.

Were you ever tempted to snoop through Christmas presents? Shake the gifts, kick the boxes? Or have you ever wanted to know what was in the letter that wasn't addressed to you? Have you held an envelope against the light to read what was in it? We all face that kind of temptation. Every single day our curiosity and our desires can suddenly become inflated. We've listen too long to the voice of temptation and then we find ourselves trapped behind our guilt and sin. What are we to do when we wrestle with temptation?

When Jesus was in the wilderness wrestling with temptation, there wasn't any ring announcer. There wasn't any tag team partner. Nobody got body slammed. There weren't any choke holds. No elbows to the throat. This was a death match. Because if Jesus didn't win, death would reign. Our lives would have no other purpose than be the playground for the terror of the wages of sin: death, to haunt and torment for eternity.

This wasn't some practiced and staged entertainment event; Jesus just didn't go through the motions. He was put to the test.

In the letter of James 1:12-14 we read, 12 "Blessed is anyone who endures temptations under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God had promised to those who love him. 13 When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me" For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; 14 but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed."

What desires did Jesus have? There in the wilderness, after having fasted for 40 days; there was hunger, a very real physical desire. And of course that was the first temptation.

There was the temptation to use all the power of heaven for his own selfish purpose. To show the world and the Tempter just who he was. That was the temptation to throw himself off the pinnacle of the Temple and let the angels rescue him.

The greatest desire of Jesus was to bring the whole world back into relationship with God. That's his message, that's his purpose, that's his calling. And that's why the final temptation was to bow down to Satan. By doing so, the whole world would bow to Jesus. But really it was an offer to shortcut God's purpose by avoiding the cross. And in bowing to Satan, the people though they bowed to Jesus, would really be bowing to Satan as well.

Temptation is sneaky. It uses our wishes and desires to entice us away from God. Sometimes it even leads us to believe that the shortcut we take is really for the benefit of God. We take the shortcut to succeed when all God really wants is faithfulness and obedience.

We may wonder why Jesus wrestled in the wilderness? It wasn't just for the direction of his ministry that Jesus wrestled. It was for us. We were the price. The only trophy Jesus received was a crown of thorns. The only reward Jesus received were the lashes of the whip as they wrapped around his weakened body.

The final round of the wrestling match, bruised, bloodied and battered, Jesus went down. It looked like he had been pinned. It looked like he'd never get up again. He was body slammed onto the cross. When all life was drained from his body he was thrown into a borrowed tomb.

The opposition cheered. They thought it was all over, but three days later, the stone was rolled away from the tomb and what had looked like a loss became a great victory.

While sin and death were celebrating, Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus won. And he did it for us.

In Hebrews 2:18 the writer says, "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."

We don't ever have to face temptations alone. We don't ever have to wonder if God knows just how hard it is to face that temptation. The answer is "Yes, God knows." Because through Jesus, God experienced the anguish and struggle of our temptation.

You heard the words, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." James 4:7. Do you know why? It's not because we're so smart or have the power. It's because of what was done by Christ on Calvary. Temptation doesn't stand a chance when you call on Jesus.

A kangaroo kept getting out of his enclosure at the zoo. Knowing that he could hop pretty high, the zoo officials put up a ten-foot fence. However, the next morning the kangaroo was out again, just roaming around the zoo. So, the zoo officials raised the height of the fence to twenty feet. Again, however, the next morning the kangaroo was out again, roaming around the zoo. This kept up, night after night, until the fence was sixty feet high.

Finally, the camel in the next enclosure asked the kangaroo, "How high do you think they'll go?" The kangaroo replied, "Probably to a hundred feet, unless somebody starts locking the gate at night."

We have plenty of morals that we have learned at the feet of Jesus. But for some reason we want to wrestle with temptation on our own. Jesus has already won that match. Let him help you with your wrestling match with temptation. Whatever it is. Bring it to him.