

I speak to you in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. *Amen.*

This year, on this First Sunday in Lent, the world is celebrating St. Valentine's Day. If you're not familiar with St. Valentine and the history of this observance, I encourage you to look it up and see what you find. As a hint, I'll tell you that the word "saint" before the name is misleading. Not much is really known about the man—or in this case, the *men*—who gave this observance its name. Although there was a feast day for St. Valentine in the Roman Catholic Church and in some Anglican churches, it was *not* on February 14, but in July. It's no longer observed in the Roman church or in the Episcopal church. As you know, it's really become a secular observance, a must especially for men who want to stay out of their sweethearts' dog houses, and in my own mind—because of the chocolate—a day that we could just as easily call Temptation Day. And on this day, that's exactly what it is.

The story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is found in all three synoptic gospels. Mark has little to say about it, only a couple of verses. Matthew and Luke give it much more attention and detail, connecting it to the ancient Hebrew scripture in a way that would be meaningful for their listeners. When Satan says, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread," Jesus responds with a quote from the eighth chapter of Deuteronomy, "One does not live by bread alone," in reference to the hungry Israelites in the desert who were fed by manna from heaven. When Satan offers to give Jesus authority over all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus will worship Satan, Jesus paraphrases Deuteronomy 6:13, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." And finally as the devil takes Jesus to the highest rooftop at the temple, that holiest of holy places, and asks Jesus to throw himself down from it to invoke the protection of God's angels, Jesus again responds with words from Deuteronomy, specifically from chapter 6, verse 16, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Satan is persistent. But Jesus perseveres, each time calling on his faith in God to get him through the temptation.

Our Lord's time in the wilderness always calls us to think about the temptations in our own lives. Each of us experiences temptation in different ways. What is tempting to one may not be tempting to others. Some temptations seem minor in the grand scheme of life, while others are huge. Every day each of us faces a variety of temptations, but they all share one thing: our ability to choose. Sometimes we've been making the same choices for so long that we no longer consider them to be choices; they've become a way of life, habits that define who we are, how we see ourselves, how we see others. Few of us would be tempted to choose that which is ugly or difficult, and so we're often drawn to temptations that are attractive or comfortable, easy or satisfying, and from that point of view, the wrong choice is often more tempting than the right choice.

We like to have choices, because choice gives us the ability to exercise power and control, although we may not realize that's what we're doing! We hope that we would make choices, use power, take control in ways that are pleasing to God, but we can't be sure that's what we're doing unless we're aware, thoughtful, and prayerful throughout every day. There are three stages in temptation, and you'll recognize them now even if you don't notice them while you're being tempted! The first is suggestion, that is, when the possibility comes into your consciousness. The second is the appeal of its attractiveness. The third is our choosing for or against. Our lives are busy. We're always in a hurry. We often don't take time to slow down and process or think or feel about the impact of our choices, unless they're major. The Very Rev. Dr. Michael Battle, a professor at General Theological Seminary, says that temptation is about the revelation of who you are, and that the power of evil is to keep us in ourselves so we don't really know who we are. If that's the case, if temptation is about who we are, then the choices we make reveal a lot about who we are.

We often hear about the power of evil, as Dr. Battle mentioned. What about our own power? Whether we acknowledge it or not, every one of us has power, and we choose how we'll use it, even when we don't consider whether that's for evil or good. Because of cultural structures and practices, some of us don't feel powerful, we may not even consider that the choices we make and the ease or difficulty with which we make them reflect our perceptions of our own power. If we are comfortable with our power, we may not think about how others will be affected by our choices. If we believe ourselves to be powerless, we're more inclined to settle for what someone else chooses for us.

Our ability to choose is a gift from God. But we are not left to use that gift alone! God has also given us the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was with our Lord during those days of temptation. In fact, we're taught in scripture that it was the Spirit who drove Jesus there. But that's not what we hear today. Today's passage from Luke says that the Spirit led Jesus *in* the wilderness. The same Spirit sustains us in the wilderness of our own lives.

On Ash Wednesday, we heard Jesus tell us to rend our hearts, not our garments. While he was speaking of the way we practice our piety, we can also apply it to the way we live our lives, what we say, what we do, what we think, and how we pray. Just as our ability to choose is God's gift to us, so is the ability to use not only our intellect, but also our hearts to guide our choices.

These words of the late Reverend Eric Milner-White speak for us in this holy season. Let us pray.

Lord, bless to me this Lent.

Lord, let me fast most truly and profitably,  
by feeding my prayer on the Spirit.  
Reveal to me myself  
in the light of thy holiness.

Suffer me never to think  
that I have knowledge enough to need no teaching  
wisdom enough to need no correction,  
talents enough to need no grace,  
goodness enough to need no progress,  
humility enough to need no repentance,  
devotion enough to need no quickening,  
strength sufficient without thy Spirit,  
lest standing still, I fall back for evermore.

Show me the desires that should be disciplines,  
and sloths to be slain.  
Show me the omissions to be made up  
and habits to be mended.  
And behind these, weaken, humble and annihilate in me  
self-will, self-righteousness, self-satisfaction,  
self-sufficiency, self-assertion, vainglory.

May my whole effort be to return to thee;  
O make it serious and sincere,  
preserving and fruitful in result,  
by the help of the Holy Spirit,  
and to thy glory,  
my Lord and my God.  
*Amen.*