

“Some of Our Greatest Temptations  
are from What We Have Found”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church

for Lent One, March 5, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Psalm 32 (VU #759)

Matthew 4:1-11

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

We have entered Lent. Traditionally Lent has been a time to examine where we have gone wrong, or maybe even let go of something that we see as sinful or less than healthy for us.

You may have those things that you feel you should give up, or stop doing at least for the 40 days of Lent. That is your decision, but there is something that seems obvious to me. One of the biggest temptations in life is being caught by what has been successful for us.

Whenever we have had success, then we assume success will return again for us. We all tend to build our lives based on what has worked in the past.

We like the predictable, and so we want events to unfold in a way that seems predictable. And so when we feel like we are being tempted to live in a certain way, it probably reflects our experience that it worked in the past.

One of the advantages of being a first-time parent, as Saunders and Lorie-Anne are, is that parenting is an all-new venture. Enjoy it, as you clearly have to date, and listen to the advice of others with a discerning ear and a concern for what is right for you and your family and your knowledge of your son. There will be lots of experts telling you how to raise your son, but you will know best. Most parents do.

But the danger comes when we have a second and third and fourth child because we may now think we have the formula for raising a child. And our inner instincts may take a back seat to our programmed responses. All of a sudden we are tempted to act in a certain way because we know how to do it.

The greatest temptation in life, no matter what the challenge, is to assume that we have the right answer. That is true of life and work and our understanding of everyday activities – experience brings with it an expectation we have all of the answers.

And the most sinful response I would suggest is not “We have never done it that way before” (the usual whipping thought by people looking for wrong-headed ideas), but rather “no one has even asked that question before.”

Now I have been skeptical of such a response for over 44 years, for when I attended my first meeting as a school trustee, the first item of business was membership in the Ontario School Trustees Association. It was the first time I had heard of the organization, so I asked the question: “What is the advantage for this board to be a member of this association?” And I knew it was a good question when the first response was “No one has ever asked that

question before.” Then I got what to me were lame excuses for paying the fee, the board approved the expenditure with one opposed, and the next item on the agenda arose.

You see, my attitude always was that if a question on policy or expenditures could not be answered to my satisfaction, then I was not about to vote for it.

Now the truth is in any activity – professionally, within a family or congregation, in a political process or wider community – we get to know the usual practice, and so we lose the discernment to ask the challenging questions, and eventually we are like everyone else – we assume things must be done a certain way. That is why fresh eyes and new approaches are always welcomed and needed.

In today’s gospel lesson we have issues of Jesus being confronted by Satan. Questions are asked of Jesus, and challenges made. We have heard them so many times that they probably seem predictable and tiresome from our modern vantage point.

But wait a minute. Let us think again. If we did not have these questions recorded and answered, think of how often we might have asked these questions ourselves of Jesus – not as a temptation, but as an expectation.

Lent is the start of the journey to Jerusalem and the trial and death of Jesus. It is a journey of rejection and being dismissed. And surely you have thought, like I have, why did Jesus so passively allow the events of the next 40 days to holy week unfold in such a direct manner?

It is natural to say that if Jesus really was special, and the unique Son of God, he should have been able to feed the world, he should have been able to protect himself and others from harm, and most certainly he should have ruled the world in such a way that justice would exist everywhere.

His own disciples asked such questions even to the end of Jesus’ life. They were not convinced that he should not take control and change the course of history. Is that not what a saviour should do?

But Jesus had insights that most of us never reach, or (at best) reach with a great deal of difficulty and struggle, learning the same lesson time after time after time until we get it right.

The story of the temptation of the devil is not so much a personal struggle with doing the right thing, but rather a personal reminder that we are always in danger of trusting our own inklings, insights, and instincts rather than trusting God to help us and guide us. We expect that with each lesson learned we have more and more knowledge to run our lives in a more perfect way, but Jesus reminded everyone (while he reminded himself and the devil) that the essence of life is not the power we have been given, but the awareness that we have to rely on God and those around us at each new turn in life.

Graham Standish, in his book *Paradoxes of Living: Cultivating Faith in Confusing Times*, suggests that our complicated lives of today actually discourage us from being open to

God's guidance. We are expected to have the answers to everything that we face, and so we are even less likely to look for God's guidance than we otherwise would.

In life the desire to seek assistance and help is never close to the surface. Why even in the book of Proverbs is the line: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight." (Proverbs 3:5)

Our tendency has always been to solve our own problems, but the danger is we get frustrated when we do not, or cannot.

The act of baptism is a reminder that raising a child is best done within a caring community where people support a family and encourage parents. That is the ideal. A congregation is made real when we gather around the Lord's Table and say that all are equal, and welcomed, and are our sisters and brothers.

May this be a day when we truly trust in God to make real the hopes of the future, and remind us of the values that we articulate and uphold as a people of faith. Let us not expect to have all of the answers without God's presence in our lives.