

There is a legend told among the Inuit people living in the Arctic regions of North America which describes how they would kill the wolves that would threaten their communities and their property. In rather graphic terms they describe how they were able to bring down a wolf simply by coating several layers of frozen blood on a sharp knife sticking out of the frozen tundra. It's believed that the wolf picks up the scent, and after circling the knife warily begins licking the frozen blood. As the wolf continues to lick faster and faster the desire for blood literally drives the wolf wild. So great becomes the craving that the wolf never notices the sting of the sharp blade on his tongue as the blood being consumed gradually becomes his own. Morning finds the wolf lying dead in the snow.

It's a graphic image of what happens when temptation claims a victim. It's a impacting reminder about the power of temptation and how temptation lures each of us just as the bloody knife attracts the unsuspecting wolf. We may warily respond at first, but we soon become consumed by the desire of the moment, never noticing the deadly sting of the sharp blade of brokenness; as the blood consumed eventually becomes our own.

Temptation can be dangerous; even deadly. There isn't one among us here today, within the sound of my voice or anyone who will ever read this message in print who hasn't been or will be impacted by the destructive power of temptation. The cost of giving in to temptation is devastating; trust is compromised, jobs are jeopardized, marriages have been lost, relationships have been ravaged, lives have been ruined. Temptation is a force more deceptively powerful than we give it credit and that's part of why it's such a grave issue.

Temptation is as old as history itself. The text from Genesis 2 takes us all the way back to the Garden where we meet a character in the narrative of creation who shows up simply casting doubt on the all-good, life-sustaining Dream of God. This cosmic being is evil personified and stands in direct opposition to whatever God would accomplish in this beautiful, just, verdant gardens where life grows and light shines at every turn. There are other names for this evil one; he is called Crafty, the Devil and Satan. He is known as the Enemy, Father of lies, the Evil One, the Adversary, the Slanderer, the False Accuser, all of which point to the dark character of the one who is also known as the Tempter. He is called the Tempter because in the texts from both Genesis 3 and Matthew 4, Tempting is his calling card. In Genesis, God tells Adam and Eve that the garden is filled with everything they need for life. They may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." When the Tempter shows up, that's right where he shows up: with the ability to interject just a little doubt into the issue. "Really? Really? Did God say... 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?' and already he's confusing Eve with that twisted question. Eve responds by further messing up God's simple directive.

A little doubt goes a long way: "Really? Did God really say that?" A simple enough question from the character who usually shows up in our imaginations with a red cape, a pointy tail and a pitchfork. But I want to say today that as long as we are content

to stuff this primal force of evil into a Halloween costume then we'll be okay with a little doubt because a little bit of doubt is about all it takes to get us licking that frozen blade.

The Tempter meets Jesus in the Wilderness in Matthew 4 where we really find a profound anatomy of temptation. The three temptations of Jesus really do give us a glimpse into our own world of temptation, but the really good news is that we are not left there. We're provided with some very solid insights into standing against the temptations in our lives.

Jesus has just been baptized; he goes from the river of new life into the desert of temptation where he'll soon be hungry, alone, and tired. The first temptation here is to use his own power to get something for which he already trusts God. All kinds of things happen in our lives when we're hungry, alone and tired. When our defensive structures are not in place, we're even more prone to offensive forces of all kinds: The lure and attraction of objectifying the bodies of other women, men—even children with pornography, the abuse of alcohol, the grip of marijuana, meth and other drugs, even the misuse of food can threaten any and all of us on so many levels. You can call me a prude—that's fine. But I'll tell you straight out story after story of how the temptation to satisfy our own appetites without God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit is like circling that knife in the snow thinking it's just harmless.

The second temptation of Jesus finds him dealing with the idea that God might have somehow abandoned him. He's in the wilderness of hunger, loneliness and fatigue, and Satan steps in casting doubt on God's presence in his life. You ever felt abandoned? Ever wondered where God is when all kinds of crazy stuff is coming down on you? Ever felt really empty and wanted more? When we feel empty, beaten down and abandoned, we'll do just about anything to build ourselves back up. And frankly, we don't choose very well. When we give in to the temptation to build ourselves up by putting others down we increase our worth at someone else's expense. "Jesus, throw yourself down from the highest point and let God come to your rescue. Satan is trying to get Jesus to simply put God to the test instead of taking him at his word. Putting God to the test is a move in the opposite direction of faith. Doubt says, "God is nowhere." Faith says, "God is now here." The same Holy Spirit that filled Jesus in his baptism just days before fills us in our lives together today. And by the Spirit's power, we are never alone in our hunger, in our loneliness, when we're tired and feeling abandoned. I can tell you first-hand stories of struggling in my own life with the doubt that Satan spews that says God is nowhere. When we stand there without the reassurance of God's grace in our lives and the power of the Holy Spirit within us, it's like circling that frozen knife in the snow thinking it's just harmless.

In the last temptation of Jesus, the Tempter—Satan takes Jesus to a very high mountain and shows him all of the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and says to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." And Jesus turns and says, "Away with you, Satan!" And what's remarkable about that very moment is that Satan leaves Jesus. "Jesus speaks the words: 'Away with you, Satan!'" and Satan leaves. And he follows that here as he has in the other two temptations with the strong word of God. In the face of all three temptations, the front line of defense in this otherwise offensive confrontation is the word of God. Jesus claims for his response to any and every temptation, the living, hope-filled, powerful word of God. "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of

God.” “It is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’” When we attempt to live our own lives on our own terms putting out trust in anything other than the living God of the universe who went to extravagant lengths to show us his love and mercy in Jesus Christ, it’s like circling that frozen knife in the snow thinking it’s just harmless. The word of God is our best defense in a very offensive world.

So let me get practical with you, first, by asking three questions: First, where does your power come from you're facing temptations in your life; when trust can be compromised or your job jeopardized? Does it come from the father of lies or the Father of Light?” Secondly, where does your strength come from when you come face to face with what you know can lose your marriage or ravage your relationships? Does it come from the Adversary—the devil, or the Advocate, the Holy Spirit? Thirdly, where does your life come from when you're facing the prince of death and your life is on the brink of ruin? Does it come from the Slanderer or does it come from the Savior?

I’ll tell you this: I’ve got my own pile of temptations stacked up like cordwood in my life. I’ve stood and still stand there circling that pile like the wolf circles that frozen knife. I’ve heard that Tempter say to me a thousand times “Really? Is that really going to matter much?” There have been times when I’ve resisted valiantly. At other times I’ve failed miserably and fallen face down into that pile of temptation. But a long time ago an old friend of mine gave me one piece of advice for times like those; he told me to say just what Jesus said: “Away with you, Satan!” And so I hold on to that little sentence and speak it often: “Away with you, Satan, in the name of Christ, “Away with you, Satan!”

We’re all going to have those moments in our lives when we resist valiantly. There will, no doubt, be many times when we fail miserably. But in any case, the Good News rings loudly, and with clarity: God loves us fully, completely and unconditionally. And just when we think we can’t go on the message comes to us again: we are saved my grace, justified, forgiven sought out, beloved, hidden in Christ and made for the glory of God. We are known, we are never forsaken, we are held in the palm of God’s hand; we are loved.

In Jesus’ name.