

Our North Star

By: Penny Holste

March 5, 2017. Do we need a kind of North Star in our lives? Today we hear the gospel story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. How did he know he was being tempted? Pastor Penny preaches on this text and says that he knew because what the devil was offering didn't match up with his mission. Our mission, like Jesus', is to help and care for others. Knowing this helps us to know when we're being tempted. And we can resist temptation because of our loving relationship with God, a relationship that becomes our North Star that will guide us home.

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We begin this morning in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well you may know this, but I just discovered that the North Star is not a particular star — that it is a *kind* of a star. And that right now as we are alive, Polaris is the North Star, but that different stars throughout the eons have served as a North Star. And a North Star is simply the star that is closest to the North Pole, that aligns with it most closely. And of course, the beauty of having a star that serves as a North Star is that in the night sky all the other stars seem to be rotating around and they're moving, but the North Star does not. So through the centuries, sailors for instance could always find their way by the North Star that would lead them safely home. And I bring that up because I think that as we talk about temptation, which is what our lessons are about today, we really need a kind of North Star for our lives.

Temptation is the topic. Adam and Eve were tempted in the garden. Jesus was tempted in the desert. And we are tempted in all kinds of different places. Maybe sometimes at our computer we're tempted to push "send" and send an angry comment, an angry email, or maybe to post something a little sarcastic. Or maybe it's that we're tempted to push "buy" when we shouldn't, but it's a spur-of-the-moment decision to purchase something that we really don't need. Or maybe we're tempted to have just one more cookie, or just one more drink. In either case, we don't really need them. Or maybe it's a matter of how we use our time. You know, we're tempted to watch just one more movie, play just one more video game, spend just a little longer on Facebook, or do one more crossword puzzle. Maybe we're tempted to spend another session in the gym or spend a long time on our phone, or maybe go to just one more store in the mall or online. And in all these cases, as we're confronted with things that can tempt us I think we need to ask two questions: how can we recognize when we're being tempted, and once we realize that how do we resist?

Well, we can look to Jesus in the gospel today, because he was tempted. There's nothing wrong with being tempted; it's what you do with it. And it's interesting, what you wouldn't know necessarily is that the thing that happened just before the lesson today is that Jesus was baptized. And then immediately after his baptism the Spirit of God sends him into the wilderness to be tempted. Now, why would the Father send his Son to be tempted? Is it that he wanted him to have some practice in resisting temptation and build up his moral muscles? Did he want Jesus to understand the human situation? We don't really know. But he was sent there, and a spirit — called Satan, the devil, the tempter — tempted him. And Jesus had to figure out what and whether he was being tempted. Because the first two temptations don't really stand out. Jesus had fasted and his fast was over, so what was wrong about accepting some food? Or the second one: Jesus as the Son of God had special powers. Was it really so bad to have a little fun and jump off a high building and watch the angels scoop you up and protect

you? But the third one — that probably stood out as a clear temptation — was when the devil said all these kingdoms and their glory will be yours if you worship me.

How did Jesus determine whether he was being tempted or not? He used one method — and that was to see if those things being offered matched up with his mission. Jesus had a mission in life. And he knew what that mission was from scripture. And that's why he kept quoting all these passages from scripture. He knew his mission, and he knew his mission was not to have power and glory. He knew it was not to be frivolous about the powers that he had and tempt the angels. He even knew that his mission wasn't always to have a full stomach. He knew his mission was to rescue us. He knew his mission was to be a poor, traveling healer, who would be hurt and crucified and die and rise again, so that we might be children of God. He knew his mission, so he knew when he was being tempted.

Well, Jesus' mission is really, in some respects, our mission. Not that we're rescuing him, but we are called to look out for other people. So our mission isn't just to do whatever we're able to do or buy whatever we have money to buy or experience whatever we have opportunity to experience. Our mission is to see how our actions impact other people, to help people and to care about them. Knowing our mission helps us to know when we are being tempted. To spend hours on the phone with a friend who's going through a hard time, for instance, might very well be part of our mission in caring for people. To spend hours on the phone building ourselves up by criticizing other people and talking behind their backs would probably be a temptation. To spend a lot of time at the gym in preparation for the occasional marathon might be part of our mission to keep our bodies intact and maybe enjoy the community of athletes. But spending time at the gym to avoid responsibilities of schoolwork or work or family responsibilities — that could be a temptation.

So knowing that we have a mission helps us to identify and recognize when we're being tempted. But what do we do when we know we're being tempted? How do we have the strength to withstand those temptations? In the play — and it's also a book and a movie — *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch is a lawyer in a small, southern town. And he has been appointed to stand up, to be the lawyer for a black man who has been accused of attacking a white woman. Now, he had a temptation not to do that, not to be that man's lawyer, because the whole town didn't like the man and they didn't want Atticus to do it. But Atticus felt he was being unfairly accused, that he was an innocent man. And so he went ahead and became his lawyer, and he was a strong lawyer in his defense. Of course, he paid a price. His family paid a price, and he paid a price. They were even attacked. But he didn't give in to the temptation. And then later on in the play he thinks his son might have been implicated in a crime, and he's tempted by his friend who's the sheriff to just sweep the evidence under the rug and forget about it. But Atticus says no. He says I can't be one person in church and another person in life. He says, if I don't live up to the things I've taught my son, I will lose him. And he is my most precious possession. Atticus did not give in. He had the strength to resist temptation because of a loving relationship, because he cared for his son and his son cared for him.

It is a loving relationship that Jesus uses to give himself strength. The relationship, of course, with the Father. He is in constant communication with his Heavenly Father through prayer. He senses the Father's presence in his regular worship, and we get a glimpse into the closeness between Jesus and his Father — the love they have for each other — in the prayer that he prays in the Book of John shortly before he is taken into custody. It goes like this (he's praying to the Father about his disciples): the glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one as we are one — I in them and you in me — that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you love me. That loving relationship is what gave Jesus strength. It was his North Star. The relationship he had with a loving Father guided him, gave him strength, and

gave him the ability to make it home safely.

It's interesting that both Atticus Finch and Jesus Christ are not motivated by dread or fear. It's not a drudgery for them to resist temptation and to follow their mission. Instead, they do it out of love — love for someone who loves them. Maybe, as we think of ourselves going through life with various temptations, and we think of our relationship to our Heavenly Father, maybe the prodigal son will help us get some insight into how we interact with God. You know the story of the Prodigal Son probably. He took his father's hard-earned money, he went out and squandered it, and then he was penniless and hungry so he headed for home. And I think a lot of times we think, oh he went home because he had to. That was the only place, that was the last place he could go, so he went. But I wonder if there wasn't more to it than that. I can imagine him walking along those dusty paths home and thinking about his father, thinking about the relationship he had had with his father, how his father sacrificed to provide for him, how his father taught him, how his father had dreams for this son, a mission. And he must have hoped that that love that he used to know was still there. Well of course, we know the end to that story. The father is standing there with open arms ready to forgive this son when he comes home, still loving him.

That father figure represents for us our relationship with our heavenly parent, with God. Because we know that in the same way, God has sacrificed to provide for us, God has taught us, God has given us strength, and God, like the father in the Prodigal Son, forgives us when we fall on our faces. So it is that relationship with a loving God that is the most important relationship we have in life. And as we go through a field of temptations, it is that relationship with a loving God which becomes our North Star that will guide us safely home.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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