

SERMON
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson
First Sunday of Lent 2018

*All learning begins not with the answers of the teacher,
but with the questions of the learner.*

Verna Dozier

Temptation has a bad reputation. We are told to avoid and guard against it; we pray not to be led into temptation. Yet today, we read about Jesus being tempted, taunted by the devil to make bread from stones, to jump off the temple pinnacle for show, and to worship Satan for power. Two of these invitations to sin begin with the phrase, “If you are the Son of God....” Maybe that’s the tempter issuing a fourth temptation, and this temptation may be at the core of every temptation Jesus ever faces—the temptation to doubt that we are children of God—that we came from God and will return to God. God’s very own—and that we are loved more than words can express. “Faith, hope, and love, ”says Paul, “and the greatest of these Love.” In the devious hands of the tempter, how about “distrust, pride, and fear,” and “the greatest of these is doubt about love.” Let’s come back to this....

This past week I was in New York. I was there with a lot to accomplish but I took a break and went to see the new Broadway musical called, “Ain’t Too Proud.” It’s the story and music of the musical group, *The Temptations*. I was thrilled to be there and laughed to think that maybe I’d find something there for today’s sermon! You see, the Gospel for the First Sunday of Lent is always the story about the three temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. After 42 years, can you blame me for wanting to find a different sort of twist on this old familiar story.

“Ain’t to Proud! Pride! There’s a good temptation.

“You’ve got a smile so bright. You know you could of been a candle.” Vanity?

“I’ve got Sunshine on a cloudy day. Self reliance?

I guess you say what can make me feel this way.... My Girl!” Idolatry?

“I’m losing you. Someone else controls your very soul.” The Devil himself!

“Never met a girl who makes me feel the way you do.

You’re out ta sight.” Get ready , cause here I come. Self-reliance?

Or maybe, “ You could’ve been anything you wanted to and I can tell, the way you do the things you do!”

Or, “The sun is shining. There’s plenty of light. But after I’ve been crying all night... since I lost my baby.”

“I wish it would rain.”

“Beauty’s only skin deep.”

There’s got to be a sermon in there somewhere!”

Sermons about the temptations that Jesus faced in the wilderness usually take shape around the political and religious messianic expectations of first century Palestine. Sermons often peer into this lesson as the deciding moment in the life of Jesus when the battle of sin and grace took place—like when David slew Goliath. The little guy up against big odds, comes out the winner, the chosen one! Proving himself worthy of kingship, blessed and chosen by God. Part of the messianic story! The summary of Jesus’ victory is that his ultimate and unwavering trust in God leaves no room for the devil to maneuver, It’s all good stuff!

I prefer the psychological approach. The devil says, "Prove YOU are God’s son! YOU! It’s all about YOU! Change stones to bread!" And Jesus answers by trusting God’s Word not claiming it for his own. The devil says, “Jump off the pinnacle of the temple and angels will catch YOU.” YOU! It’s all about YOU!” And Jesus answers by trusting God’s Purposes not his own. The devil says, “I’ll give YOU all the empires of the world if YOU kneel down to me.” YOU! It’s all about YOU!” And Jesus answers by worshipping God alone. One of the biggest temptations in life is to put YOURSELF in the middle of everything as if we are the most important creatures around. A lot of damage has been done to others and to creation itself, in the name of Self. Jesus prayed for the knowledge and strength to do God’s will, not his own. That’s the point! But the devil is sneakier than this.

There IS a sermon in the Broadway show, “Ain’t Too Proud,” but it’s not what I was looking for. From my vantage point, there is a lesson imbedded that is way-different than I expected and an invitation to an observance of Lent with a slightly different spin.

“Did you like the show?” someone asked me at intermission. I didn’t answer but I was troubled by what I was seeing. “What do you think?” I was asked again at the end of the show and like a New York Times critic I started to explain the difficulty I perceived. “Of course I like it,” I said, not wanting to offend anyone. “Who doesn’t like the music!” After all, the audience gave a standing ovation. But the show? I think they made major production and script decisions that I disagree with. What? Well, first, they made the BIG mistake. The storyline was given to us by a narrator throughout. Otis Williams. He was one of the original members of the Temptations quintet—the organizer and the leader of the group. He is also the last surviving original member. The play was really just a musical review. (That’s a technical term. Musical Review.) It had a storyline, but not a story. Informational but not engaging. The audience didn’t suffer along with the characters or get into the story. We just listened. This is what happens when you have a narrator. You listen but you don’t “enter in.” It’s just about them. There’s no involvement, therefore, it is not personal. It’s a flat line.

The greatest temptation is to remain objective about life, about God, and about each other. Removed. Distant. Uninvolved. Untouched. A great temptation to protect ourselves from the action—the messiness of life, to avoid the pain and therefore miss the joys of being alive! The narrative told us that the members of the Temptations struggled. Their relationship were strained. They were constantly touring which meant any normal home life was impossible. Relationships became abusive. Drugs softened the pain. The music industry made the money off their labor and talent. As a “crossover band” in the 60s and 70s, meaning that their act was designed to *cross over* racial lines, they suffered body-threatening racism in the South. But this production didn’t allow us to experience that either. The narrator gave just an unemotional report without details. It costs millions of dollars to develop and produce a show of this magnitude but the audience was cheated out of an experience—any possible life-changing, life-shaping experience.

The Lenten take-away? Don't just listen in. Don't let this Lent be a flat-line. Enter in. The story of Jesus is your story. It's not just about something that happened back then. It's personal. Don't miss the story, the people around you, the bread and wine, the music, the prayers. Don't be objective about your life and the lives of others. Resist being removed, distant, uninvolved, untouched. Learn to trust God in the midst of the messiness of living—in the pain and in the joys. Don't let Luke and the other gospel writers be narrators but be invited into the story. It is our story. It is about us, all of us. It's about what God is doing with and for us.

I received a phone call on Friday asking me if I would visit a woman who is home-bound and experiencing some scary health issues. Her son asked if I would meet her and pray with her. When I arrived on Saturday I found her son and daughter and healthcare provider there. I had never met any of them before. They thanked me for “bringing the Church” to her. Bringing “the Church?” We are the church! She was a member of Grace Church Elkridge for years. They were raised in the Church. The healthcare provider was a woman of faith. I don't “bring the Church.” We ARE the Church, wherever we are gathered. This story of ours is not distant, doesn't belong only to clergy, but is as close as hands and feet and the breath we share. *When two or three are gathered, there is Christ in the midst of us!* We met as the Church, in love and concern for each other.

I have been privileged in my years of ministry to meet many wonderful teachers. One of the greats was Verna Dozier. (I think Anna knew her as well.) She was an ordinary sort of person, a high school English teacher and Christian educator. She is credited with changing and revitalizing the way Episcopalians learn and use God's word in their lives. She was born in Washington, DC, received a BA and an MA in English from Howard University and went on to teach in public schools for 32 years. During this time and well into her retirement, Verna was deeply involved in the study of the Bible and Christian education. For her, religious authority came with baptism and lies with laity— ministry was not just for the ordained. In a 1997 commencement address, she said:

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She was a teacher, mentor, conference and workshop leader, public speaker, and as a trainer and consultant for the Episcopal Church. One of the things I most remember about her, besides the sparkle in her eye and her patience as a good teacher, was her probing question—simple, but crucial for the living spirit of the church.

“Where are you in this story?”

she would ask. The bible is not a history book but a living document, a life-line—for (not about) the life of the Holy Spirit in the community of the faithful. Verna was also an activist. In her teaching, she would often use stories about racism and other social issues. Having grown up under Jim Crow she was an advocate of oppressed people throughout society and the Church. Years ago, and I mean many many years ago, she supported the ordination of women to the priesthood and the episcopate and was an advocate for gay and lesbian rights in the Church. She had tremendous impact on generations of lay leaders emphasizing the centrality of lay leadership in the Church, “the Baptized.” *Equipping the Saints* is her best known book, followed by *Sisters and Brothers: Reclaiming a Biblical Idea of Community*.

These forty days of Lent are a time and a place where we can get involved, bring forth and share what is real within each one of us. It’s a time when we can wrestle with our devils and ultimately, like Jesus, we can let God to be God. Temptation is defined not as some distant storyline, but as “a desire to engage in short-term urges that threaten long-term goals.” Let’s take the long-view. Let’s take it on together.

The challenges and rewards of Lent are not “Just in my ‘magination.” The story of God in Christ is real for each one of us.

AMEN