

Luke 4:1-13 ¹ Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tested by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³ The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." ⁴ Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone'." ⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And the devil said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸ Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him'." ⁹ Then the devil led him to Jerusalem and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' ¹¹ and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone'." ¹² Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'." ¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Luke 4:1-13

03/09/2025 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

"On Not Breaking Bad"

Rev. Amy Terhune

Most of you know that I'm a fan of murder mysteries. My husband is a news junkie and when we get to the place where I can't stand to watch one more second of news – which is usually somewhere between 10 and 20 minutes into a news program – that's when I pull out my headphones, turn on my laptop, and find something else to watch. A couple of weeks back, I went hunting on Netflix for something new to watch when the news got to be too much, and I stumbled across a movie on Netflix called "To Catch a Killer" which starred Shailene Woodley, who I rather like. It was a bit too violent for my taste, but an interesting premise. Woodley portrays Eleanor Falco, a young woman who has struggled with substance abuse disorder in her past. She dreams of being an FBI agent, but the FBI doesn't hire recovering addicts. But some police departments will. So she goes to work as a beat cop. When a tragedy unfolds in her city, Eleanor has the presence of mind to make some smart moves that preserve evidence. This attracts the attention of the FBI agent assigned to oversee the aftermath. He gives her a shot – a shot to make it into the FBI, to land her dream job. Unfortunately, things go wrong – things that are not her fault – but politics and bureaucracy play out, and by the time she goes home at the end of a very long day, Eleanor has not only lost her shot at her dream job, she's been fired and has lost her employment altogether.

When she gets home, she goes digging through a junk drawer in her kitchen, and there, at the back, is a bottle of pills. And over the course of the night, which the movie captures in a series of short clips, she cries, she screams, she gets in the bath, she does anything she can think of to distract herself, to not give in, to not take those pills. And she wins. She gets through the night. Eleanor Falco stays clean. But it's agonizing to watch.

I contrast that with another show that remains wildly popular even though it's been out for more than a decade now. In full disclosure, I have never watched it, but I've read enough, I think. It's the story of Walter White, a small-town high school chemistry teacher who works a second job at a car wash after school to try to make ends meet. When he finds out on his 50th birthday that he's dying of cancer, he decides to use his chemistry training to make methamphetamines to sell and hopefully get

his pregnant wife and teenage son out of crushing debt before he dies. Walter White gives into temptation, perhaps for the right reasons, but with disastrous consequences. It starts with one bad choice that leads to the ruination of his family, his reputation, his legacy, and some might argue, his sanity. The series is called "Breaking Bad", and I know that's meant to reference the way his life veers off course. But still, I think the title itself is revealing. He isn't just breaking bad. He breaks. He's broken. He breaks apart, and he breaks just about every good thing left in his life. Whereas somehow, Eleanor Falco manages to hold it together to fight another day.

Our theme for today is temptation. But I simply must express my frustration with church and its typical approach to temptation because honestly, we haven't taken this theme very seriously in the past few decades. I've put a screenshot up on the screen that I took Thursday morning when the United Methodist Church introduced its Lent Photo Drive. Each day, they publish a word to consider, and we're invited to post a picture that relates to that word. On Thursday, the word was "tempted", and to advertise this project, this is the picture they posted. It's a chocolate bar. A piece of candy. Not that I'm trying to undermine the very real struggle of diabetics or those trying to lose weight, but all the same, I've got to wonder: how did we go from what's in scripture today to a chocolate bar? This picture is posted by someone who has never clung to sobriety by their fingernails all night long. This picture is posted by someone who has never been so exhausted by the never-ending cycle of poverty that they have to fight themselves within not to take the easy road. Or maybe they have faced such things, and they just don't want to talk about it. A candy bar is a lot easier to reckon with, maybe.

But when Jesus was out in the wilderness, having been led there by the Holy Spirit following his baptism, it wasn't a chocolate bar with which the Devil lured him: "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." To which Jesus answers, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" I struggle with this one every time. Jesus has been out there for weeks. He hasn't eaten anything. How is he supposed to work, to heal, to teach, to travel if he's not taking care of himself? What's the problem here? Is the message that self-care is bad? If I set boundaries, if I don't answer my cell phone on my day off, if I leave work in time to have dinner with my family, am I going against what Jesus wants? I don't think so. Self-care is about making room for God to heal and strengthen us. So I don't think this is about self-care. I think it's about self-sufficiency. Here's what self-sufficiency sounds like: I can take care of myself. I've got everything I need, and if I don't, I can find it and secure it for myself. I am enough. I don't need others. I don't need God. I am not a drain on others. I am not a drain on society. I am a giver, not a taker. I am self-sufficient.

The problem with this is that it isn't true. 15 times every minute, more or less, I take in oxygen from the atmosphere and return carbon dioxide. Several times a day, I take in nourishment from plants and animals, and I return human waste and energy. When I was born, I took in everything my mother could give me, and I gave back only infantile love and giggles. As I child, everything I needed was given to me by someone else – my parents, my teachers, my church, my community. All of this is necessary to human survival. But the fact remains that countless numbers of people gave to me first. Creation itself gave to me first. God gave me gifts and life itself. And only later, after I had taken all that the world had to offer, could I give back. I have never been self-sufficient. I never will be self-sufficient. I exist in symbiotic relationship with you, with the planet, with creation. Jesus never forgot that he was not his own little world. He remained connected. Does it make you uncomfortable to think that Jesus needed relationships? It shouldn't. Relationship is God's core identity – Father, Son, Holy Spirit. They exist as three and one simultaneously. Jesus understood that sometimes, we need to go hungry. We need to go without. We need to understand ourselves as part of something bigger than ourselves. One doesn't live by bread alone. Spirit. Not stomach. That's what needs feeding.

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, “To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” To which Jesus responds, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him’.” The second temptation Jesus faced was to worship Satan in exchange for power over the world. The temptation here is to take the easy road—to compromise integrity; to allow the ends to justify the means. Brett Blair has called this the temptation to take the crown without the cross. And Jesus is tempted. At the price of a little bit of lip service, think of all the suffering that could have been avoided—the martyrdom of thousands of Christians in the following centuries; the wars, oppression and genocide that dot the landscape of human history. But Christ doesn’t bite. He knows full well that one can’t separate the ends from the means. He chooses to suffer. He asks us to be willing to do the same.

Jesus’ final temptation was to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple and let the angels save him. This time, the devil throws Scripture back in Jesus’ face. So, one lives by the word that comes from the mouth of God, eh, Jesus? ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him, huh? Well, the word of God says, “He will command his angels concerning you,” and “On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” What’s the temptation here? To put on a show, of course. To make the crowds below oooh and aaah. To capture their attention and draw their gaze. I like how Bishop Will Willimon explains this. He writes, “Well, if you won’t show a little compassion for the hungry, if you don’t really care about making the world a better place in which to live, then at least show a little concern for those struggling to believe, who can’t believe. Show that crowd down there in the pews that you are indeed who the voice said you are. Leap from the Chapel tower and stand before them unbroken. After all, you’re God.” [from “Jesus’ Temptation” by Will Willimon, www.Sermons.com.] I get it. Have you ever wanted a sign? Have you ever just wished that everything would be clear and there’d be no room left for anyone to doubt? I have. Because there are times when I’d really like to give the world proof without having to live it and struggle with it and suffer through it in my own life.

These are not “chocolate bar” temptations. These are “wrestle all night long and hold on by the skin of your teeth” temptations. And they were very real for Jesus – a question of identity and purpose. He chose connection with others despite our frailties. He chose suffering over expediency. He chose faith and depth over stunts and flourish. Show isn’t substance. Entertainment isn’t eternal truth. But the fact that Jesus truly wrestles with these struggles suggests that things could have gone either way.

“Which,” writes Bill Ritter, “is not what you want to hear. Because, where temptation is concerned, you want to believe that Jesus is above it... that the friends of Jesus are above it... that the sworn (and ordained) servants of Jesus are above it... and that the closer you get to Jesus, the further you’ll be above it, too. But concerning your illusion of immunity, listen to Fred Craddock’s warning:

“Temptation is not a measure of your weakness. Temptation is a measure of your strength. The stronger you are... the more capable you are... the more opportunities you have... the more power and influence you have... the greater will be your temptation. For as George Buttrick used to say, you are not going to have a sea storm in a roadside puddle. Small people have small temptations. But Jesus.... whew....what a storm. [adapted from “Till a More Opportune Time” by William A. Ritter, www.Sermons.com.]

Temptations are very real. To be sure, we may not face the same specific temptations that Jesus did. I can’t turn stones into bread. I’ll never hear a little voice offering to let me rule the world in exchange for lip service. And I wouldn’t dream of jumping off the roof of the church building to prove God’s providence. All I would prove is that existence of gravity. But I do face the temptation to put

myself first, to compromise my allegiance for the sake of advancement, to entertain. And all of these really come down to the basics: to forget or ignore who I am.

Maybe this will sound familiar to you. If I'm a child of God, why don't I feel like one? Anybody ever whispered that to themselves in a moment of grief, heartache, disease, distress? I have. I remember when I was confirmed, the church gave me a book entitled, "If God loves me, why can't I get my locker open?" It's basically the same idea. I'm not exactly sure where it comes from, but all of us struggle sometimes with the notion that if God loves us, life wouldn't throw us curve balls. But that simply isn't so. Even Jesus was not spared of suffering and grief.

Or how about this terrible temptation, "If I'm a child of God, then why don't I act like one?" I know there are times when I don't act like one. How about you? Why do I have the thoughts I sometimes have? Why do I do the things I sometimes do? And why, after all these years, do I still struggle – pride, greed, lust, envy, addiction, laziness, anger? How can I be a Christian if I don't live as a Christian should live? I struggle with that all the time. I preach grace for you, but I have a terribly difficult time extending it to myself. Maybe you understand.

Long ago, when Jesus was dying, the temple leaders taunted Jesus with words that by then may have sounded all too familiar. "IF...you are the son of God, come down from that cross and save yourself." Regardless of whose mouth it came from, Jesus had learned to recognize that voice. He knew it all too well, and he did not heed it. He was the Son of God. We are gathered here today because Jesus remembered who he was. He did not come down from that cross and save himself. He stayed on it and saved all of us instead. Which should give us hope, even if we don't always feel or act like we're God's children. Because after all, temptation can be resisted. Jesus proves it. Eleanor Falco proves it. We don't have to break bad. Tell me about your struggles with self-sufficiency, your agony with the way things are, the doubts that leave you questioning who you are in God's plans, and I'll tell you about a savior who dealt with the same temptations and trials, who found a way beyond them, and who still invites us to rise above them, too. Thanks be to God. Amen.