

**St. John's, Tappahannock, VA**  
**First Sunday in Lent**  
**February 25, 2007**  
**"Where for Forty Days he was tempted by the devil"**  
**The Rev. William T. Pickering**

On Ash Wednesday, Candine joyfully invited us all to Lent 2007 and laid out many of the opportunities that Lent provides for us to experience our humanity and prepare for an incredibly powerful and joyful Easter.

Candine did not discuss the opportunity presented in the Gospel for this morning—Temptation!

When Candine arrived for the second service on Ash Wednesday, she said that she had already had a girl come to her and ask what happened if you broke your rule for Lent – she had already broken hers three times!

We had only been into Lent a few hours by then, so the forty days was clearly going to be difficult for this young lady.

Candine, pastorally, told the girl to apologize to God and try a little harder.

The forty days that are set aside in the Liturgical calendar for Lent are to be equivalent to the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted by none other than the devil himself.

Jesus was confronted with temptation for a very long time. If it were not for temptation, it seems to me that life could be really easy to manage. Lent would certainly be easy!

Temptation, however, is intimately linked to the one thing that makes sin most possible – rationalization. If it were not for the power of rationalization, there would be a great deal less sin.

The devil does not tempt Jesus with things that would be obviously wrong, for that would be much too easy for him to reject.

The devil tempted Jesus with turning stones into bread.

This would not only assuage Jesus' hunger, but it could do away with hunger in the world. One could easily rationalize that this is a VERY good thing.

The devil tempted Jesus with power and authority over all the nations of the world.

Jesus came for the good of human kind. With that kind of power he could bring justice, mercy and peace to the world. It would not be much of a stretch at all to rationalize this as a VERY good thing.

The devil tempted Jesus with doing a really showy dive off the

pinnacle of the Temple and having the angels catch him and keep him from being hurt.

This would certainly remove any doubt from even the most skeptical of Pharisees that Jesus was someone very special and would give him all the authority he could possibly need to reform the religion of his people. Again, it would not take a great deal of rationalization to convince yourself that this was a VERY good thing.

All Jesus would have to do for any of these “good” things to happen would be to worship the devil. It seems like no big deal to straighten out human kind for all time.

It would seem that what is in our hearts may be even more important than what we accomplish. What difference would it make to worship the devil for the betterment of all human beings – for the end of hunger and war, the establishment of peace and justice and true religion?

It makes all the difference in the world, no matter how we try to rationalize it.

Jesus was tempted to do the right things for the wrong reasons. This business of temptation and rationalization calls into question any temptation for us to believe that the ends justify the means.

As the Gospel for Ash Wednesday said so eloquently – “where your heart is, there will your treasure be also.”

Lent is not nearly so much about what it is that we do – what we give up, or what we take on – as it is about where our heart is in the process.

It is a spiritual discipline that is meant to speak to our heart and our soul, and not to our pride at our ability to accomplish some task that we should probably be doing anyway.

Lent is a time for us to search our hearts, our motives, our rationalizations and our temptations.

This is a time for us not just to do this as individuals, but also as a community. Not only do we have hearts and souls and spirits as individuals, but there is a heart and a soul and a spirit to St. John’s Church.

Who we are as individuals has much to do with who we are as a community, so we are all incredibly important in the process of being the Church.

Lent for us, in this Interim time especially, needs to be a time to search out the heart, soul and spirit of this community and this place. What is it that brings us energy, strength and purpose and that turns our hearts to God? What is it that stifles that same spirit – and we need to try very hard not to be tempted to rationalize.

The hard work of this Lent is to sort out what it is that we are called to

be and to do from what it is that we think we are supposed to be and to do.

We want to grow – growing is a good thing that we are supposed to do, but why do we want to grow? Is growth just so that we can improve the bottom line in the budget, or is it because it is the Great Commission and something that God wants for us. Are we called to grow, and excited about that Call?

Are we called to be a place where the poor and the hungry come to be cared for and fed? Certainly it is something that we are supposed to do, but is that something that we feel God has called us to do – is it where our heart is?

Are we called to be a community whose worship is special and uplifting and where we are able to truly praise God, or is the Sunday worship experience just something that we are supposed to do that we can check off a weekly “to do” list? Is glorious worship where our heart is and where we are called to be?

This is a time to rend our hearts and not our garments and to search our souls and spirits for where God would have us be.

I join Candine in welcoming the community of St. John's to Lent 2007! We have a great deal to do in these 40 days and the time will be past before we know it, but consider what an incredible Easter it will be when we can celebrate Resurrection – new life – Jesus' new life – and ours.

***Amen.***