

Yr. C, Lent 1
March 6, 2022
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1452 Words

Lessons: Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

What I'm about to say might be a little unsettling for some of you. Your rector learned all about blackjack this week. You know, the card game which seduces gamblers, quickly producing big winners and *bigger* losers.

I didn't say I played it! I just listened to a podcast hosted by Ira Glass. He explained how the simplicity of this game—trying to get cards to add up to 21, or close to it, without going over—how it so easily draws people in. He also pointed out that in casinos the odds only *slightly* favor the dealer. So, it is incredibly enticing. It's easy to tell yourself—"I'll play just a couple of more hands. Surely, my luck is about to change for the better."

The first Sunday in Lent is always about temptation—specifically, the temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness, immediately after his baptism. It makes sense for us to think about temptation in this season of Lent. After all, we are being challenged to conduct a thorough, spiritual self-examination, and to turn away from the thoughts, words, deeds, and *inaction* which lead us astray from the healthy, holy life God wants us to have—and share—with other people.

Yet, Jesus' temptations can seem so dramatic. In all my years of ministry, I've never heard of anyone who fasted for forty days. I've never had a parishioner who was tempted to believe they could gain authority over all the nations and kingdoms of the world (thank goodness). I don't know anybody who is really tempted to believe that God would dispatch angels to deliver us from the force of gravity. This is not to say that there are not *other* dramatic temptations out there.

Like the time a guy named Ben—a faithful Christian—faced his own test. Jack Hitt told this story recently in an episode of *This American Life*...the story of how Ben, and a friend named Colin, learned how to count cards. Now, card counting is a strategy for predicting when you're most likely to win at blackjack. If you are good at counting cards, you can tilt the odds which favor the casino back toward yourself.

Ben and Colin were good at it, and they just *knew* they could teacher other people how to do it too. They dreamed of building a large team of card counters, but—because it would be a purely cash enterprise—they needed to find people they could trust completely. They discovered the *perfect* source for honest, card counting blackjack players—*church people!*

Before I tell you what they did, I need to tell you about another temptation—the one that Moses knew his people would face in the Promised Land—the temptation to forget God.

"When you come into the land that the LORD is *giving you*," Moses said, "take some of the *first* fruits of that ground...and *give it back* to God." Moses wants the people to remember how far they have come. He wants the people to remember who they are...and whose they are. They are to remember God's goodness...by practicing thanks-*giving* in return.

It is a spiritual discipline to consistently practice generous thanks-giving. Maybe this is your Lent for practicing thanksgiving with some of *your* first-fruit kinds of gifts that glorify God and bless other people. Maybe this is the Lent to remember how far you've come...a Lent to remember who you are, and whose you are.

Ben and Colin faced a real challenge. If gambling was a sin—*as they believed*—how could they possibly justify what they planned to do? Moreover, how would they convince all those other church people to join in? Simple—you tell yourself (and everyone else) that this is *not* gambling.

“Look people,” they said. “We are going to win big bucks—not through luck or even through prayer. We’re going to win big bucks by simply using God’s gift of mathematics.”

Never underestimate your power of rationalization. We all can become remarkably creative in shaping a story that helps us forget...who we are and whose we are. We use rationalizations not only to justify doing things we ought not to do. We also rationalize *not* doing the things we *should* do, or giving the gifts we *should* give, or speaking out about the injustices and cruelties that we *should* confront.

One of the best litanies in our Book of Common Prayer is the *very* challenging Litany of Penitence which we prayed on Ash Wednesday. It covers the whole range of temptation and sin which afflicts God’s people. It pins me to the mat every time. There is no wiggle room.

This Lent, I commend the Litany of Penitence for your personal prayers. If you want to confront your own rationalizations for what you’ve done...or left undone—page 267 will do the trick every time!

With a large team, trained and ready to go to work, Ben and Colin needed money for the team to use. So, they convinced *other* church people to hand over retirement funds and savings for these trustworthy young people to take to casinos and multiply. It was a ‘fishes and loaves’ proposition—a promised, surefire, shortcut to abundance. By 2007, business was great! Thirty blackjack players were crisscrossing the United States, hitting casinos all over.

Not only were they making thousands—and even tens of thousands of dollars per night; they were also inflicting financial pain on the casinos. See, even though they absolved their own consciences about this mission, they *still* looked down upon casinos as being ‘of the devil.’ That’s the tremendous power of rationalization steadily at work in our minds.

This seems like a good time to mention that blackjack is not on the vestry agenda for this month. Okay, okay—I can go farther than that. I don’t really see this coming up on our agenda for April, either...(or ever)! I don’t care how badly we need to replace the organ or address other capital needs, we’re not going to count cards to achieve it!

Well, I’ve had a lot to say about temptation and the power of our rationalizations. It’s pretty clear that in ways large *and* small, there is this relentless voice in our minds, helping us to justify ourselves...by neglecting God. It is so easy to forget the goodness of God’s grace that we *take*...for granted.

It’s also easy to forget the promise of God’s mercy if only we will acknowledge our faults and turn toward Christ’s never-failing love. It’s easy to *believe in* God’s mercy; but hard to practice *sharing it* with others.

So, the problem is obvious—we are simply good at neglecting God. We’re prone to forget who we are, whose we are, and how far we’ve come.

Well, where’s the *Good News*? Where’s the hope as we tip toe into this new Season of Lent. I’ll tell you—it’s right there in St. Paul’s letter to the Romans.

Dear people of God, “The Word is near you, (already) on your lips and (already) in your heart!” Paul’s not talking about the Bible, here. There was no such thing as a Bible when Paul wrote to the Romans. He’s talking about the Word of God—who created heaven and the earth—all that is seen...and unseen.

St. Paul is talking about the Word of God—eternally begotten of the Father—God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God. This is the Word who—by the power of the Holy Spirit—became flesh. He was born of the virgin Mary, crucified by Pontius Pilate, and for three days he was dead and buried...but the Word of God is *unstoppable...unbeatable*.

The Word of God is Life that swallows up death. The Word of God is Truth that overwhelms deceit. The Word of God is Faith which conquers fear. The Word of God is never-failing Mercy which removes anything or anyone that might separate us from the love of God.

This Word is always near you. This Word is *with you—already* on your lips, *already in your heart*. Just say yes...because “*Everyone...everyone* who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

When we gather around the altar this Lent to celebrate The Great Thanks-*giving*, our prayer reminds us that Jesus Christ our Lord was tempted in *every way* as we are, yet did not sin. (Therefore,) by his grace we are able...to triumph over every evil there is.¹

The Word of God—on our lips and in our hearts—empowers us to live a life (of goodness) not just for ourselves, but for him²...the One who died for us, *and* who rose again...*unstoppable, unbeatable*, and very near...right now...and forever more.

Amen.

¹ The proper preface for the season of Lent, *The Book of Common Prayer*, p.

² The proper preface for the season of Lent, *The Book of Common Prayer*, p.