Suppose someone decided to do a test and put a box of toys, some puzzles, a video game and a big slice of chocolate cake on a table, brought a five year-old into the room and told the child she could play with anything on the table but under no circumstances was she to touch that piece of cake. If the one administering this test were to leave the room to watch the child through a two-way mirror, the question would not likely be “Will the child eat the cake?” but “How long will it be before she does?”

We don't know if God placed the serpent in the garden in order to tempt Adam and Eve and pull them away from God or if the serpent was extremely wily and came up with its own unique way to test the first humans. God created Adam and Eve and gave them everything they needed to live a happy and abundant life. They had trees of succulent fruit and fertile fields in which to grow all the food they needed. There was just one thing, God told Adam, one thing in this whole big, green, luscious garden that they were not to do. “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die”

Everything went along well at first. Adam and Eve delighted in the place that had been made for them and they ate of every tree in the garden except that one. Life would have been perfect for the couple; maybe they would have lived forever if it hadn't been for one thing: the devil disguised as a serpent. I find it interesting that Eve didn't seem to think it unusual that a snake would come up to her and start talking, but these were the early days of creation; who was Eve to say what was normal or not? So the snake slithered its way to Eve and spoke to her: “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?” The woman told him, “We can eat anything we want except from that one tree. God said not even to touch it or we would die.” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

That did it. Who wouldn't want to be as powerful as God, to know what goes on in God's head and heart? The woman took a bite of the forbidden fruit then passed some on to Adam. God showed up, figured out what had happened, confronted the two humans and listened to them play the world's very first blame game. “The woman made me do it,” whined Adam. Eve had her own excuse, “The serpent tricked me into eating it.” In the very first temptation experiment, the results were in: Humans: 0, Serpent: 1.

Fast forward to another temptation story, this time with Jesus as the main character. You'll remember that right after Jesus was baptized, God sent him into the wilderness for 40 days in order to be tempted by the devil. After fasting for 40 days, Jesus was famished. This was a good place for the devil to start. “If you are the Son of God, turns these stones into loaves of bread and have yourself a meal.” But Jesus quoted the book of Deuteronomy, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Since that didn't work out so well, the evil one tried a different approach. He took Jesus to the holy city and put him on the highest point of the temple, then said to Jesus, “If you are the Son of God, go ahead and jump off, for scripture says, ‘His angels will not so much as let you bang your foot on a stone.’” Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Tempter: 0, Jesus: 2. Since mountains are where a lot of important encounters happen between God and humans, the devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Devil: 0, Jesus: 3.

Fill his own needs. Mock the temple by jumping off it and landing on his feet. Grab everything his Father had already given him. With each temptation, there was more at stake and more people to be affected. But Jesus would not be fooled by the devil's wiles. He knew who he was and whose he was. He came into the world to save it from the sin that has infected everyone who has come after Adam and Eve. He came into the world both to be a role model for us when it comes to temptation and to forgive us when we stray from him and those who need us.

Every week, we confess our sin at the beginning of the service. We admit that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. The next part of the confession is what always gets me. “We have sinned against you in thought, word and deed, by what we have done and ***by what we have left undone.***” It's that reminder of what I have failed to do in the past week that always tells me how much I have disappointed God and the people I serve. Forgetting to do the things I promised to do. Not speaking out on behalf of the most vulnerable among us. Not taking time to sit still with scripture when I feel overwhelmed and need some guidance. Flailing around like a turtle flipped on its back, legs furiously pawing the air, waiting for someone to come and set it upright, exhausted at the end of a day without going anywhere.

We live in a culture that runs on temptation as its fuel. Voices telling us that this thing or this car or this neighborhood will fulfill all our dreams. Telling us not to be bothered by the violence and hatred and bigotry that ruins human lives on the other side of the world or even around the corner. Telling us that God is OK with us turning up at church on Sunday and acting like we've never heard of God Monday through Saturday. You and I are easily duped into doing the tempter's work for him. All the devil has to do is offer us something pretty and shiny and we will instantly forget the ugly and dull around us. In a world without Jesus, we would be doomed by our selfishness, our apathy and indifference.

Thank God we live in *this* world, full of Jesus, of his forgiveness and grace. He has faced temptation head-on and defeated it so it cannot defeat us. As Paul wrote, “...one man's action leads to justification and life for all but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

One man's action. A man who died for us, so that our sins might be entirely forgiven. A man's whose supreme sacrifice conquers the one who seeks to conquer us. A sacrifice that comes from the astounding, inexplicable, undeserved, abundant love of Christ for all of creation, for every one of us. Every day.

Or put another way:

You and I: 0, Jesus: Everything.

Amen.

*Lent 1A*

*March 5, 2017*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Matthew 4: 1-11*