

“Take On Something for Lent”

Date: March 1, 2020

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Matthew 4:1-11

Occasion: Lent 1, Year A

Theme: Lent, Temptation, Identity in Christ

A lot of people who have pets are starting to “micro-chip” their dogs and cats. A small chip is injected under their skin and when a special scanner is run over the chip, the pet’s whole history is made available. It will tell you the pet’s name; the owner’s name, home address and phone number; the vet’s name and number; and any medications it takes.

It’s all there. Most animal shelters now have these scanners, and when a lost animal is brought in, a scanning procedure is one the first things done. Often, a lost dog or cat is immediately found and reunited with its owner. Pretty cool, huh?!

Technology is changing the world we live in. Using an app on their phone, parents can now track the whereabouts of their children or teenagers, sometimes without them even knowing it. Now they have computer monitors that track our driving habits – recording not only our speed, but where we go and who gets in and out of the car. Amazing!

After 9-11-2001, there are security cameras almost everywhere. You don’t have to be a famous person like the duchess of England to have people watching you constantly. “Big Brother” is watching almost all of the time. But even with all of the security devices and tracking technology we have, there is just too much temptation in the world to keep track of it all.

And the urge for people to misbehave and break the rules is so strong, you would never be able to keep track of everybody all of the time. Our culture is packed with options for choosing both good and bad things. The Internet, for example, has the potential for both great good and also

great sleaziness. Cell phones help us to keep in touch with each other, but also present a real hazard when we use them while driving. An automobile is a wonderful thing, unless you put a drunk driver behind the wheel. With the possibility of goodness, there is also the temptation to do the wrong.

And have you noticed how our culture seems to enjoy watching people acting badly? The Jerry Springer Show comes to mind, but any number of Real Life Police shows, or reality television or one from a while ago, Girls Gone Wild. It seems that we enjoy watching people acting crazy and immoral. As though watching others behave badly somehow absolves us of our own bad behavior.

The season of Lent is supposed to be a time of serious soul-searching and renewal. It is a time of self-examination and then rededicating ourselves to a life of service, and even suffering if need be, in the cause of Christ's kingdom. It is a time of preparation for the passion of Christ. How then, has it become a time to give up chocolate, hamburgers or whatever? What have we done?

The temptations or tests that Satan threw at Jesus during his 40-day fast in the wilderness were not just challenges to DO something he wasn't supposed to do. They were challenges tempting Jesus to BE someone he was not meant to be. Do you hear the difference? Let me say it again.

The ultimate temptations in life are NOT those that push you to DO things you're not supposed to do; but to BE someone you weren't made to be. The devil wasn't tempting Jesus to simply satisfy his physical hunger by turning stones into bread. He was tempting the Son of God to replace his relationship with God with fast food.

The devil wasn't merely tempting Jesus to jump off the temple roof. He was tempting the Son of God to demand that His Heavenly Father hop to take action on the Son's desires and preferences.

The devil wasn't merely tempting Jesus with the power and prestige offered by the kingdoms of the world. He was tempting the Son of God to intentionally orphan himself from the Father, to be someone he wasn't created to be.

The devil did his best to get Jesus to act against his nature and to change his identity to be less than who he truly was. But did you ever consider how stacked the deck was AGAINST the devil in the desert?

Jesus had been in the wilderness for 40 days and nights, away from the needy crowds, mundane concerns and tiresome commitments. For 40 days and nights he had been in communion with His Father in ways we cannot imagine.

So, after 40 days and nights, Jesus may have been famished, but his spirit was strong. After 40 days and nights, Jesus was more truly himself than he had ever been before. The devil fails in his test of our Lord, not because Jesus refuses the things he's been offered. The devil fails because Jesus will BE no one other than his true self – the Son of God.

The temptation to be less than who you are, to be less than what God made you to be, to be other than who you were born to be, this is the Great Temptation that underlies all of the other temptations in life.

Jesus' life, death and resurrection offer to us a new covenant relationship with God. And because Jesus took his identity all the way to the cross, we have the gift of new life in Christ. God has called us to be His sons and daughters. God calls us His own. God calls us His beloved. In Christ, we have been redeemed, re-dreamed, re-created and re-born.

We are given a new identity in Christ who calls us to be true to this identity – to allow Christ to live his resurrection life in and through us. This is what it means to be the Body of Christ, to have Christ in us and to be made new.

During this season of Lent, instead of giving up some indulgence (like chocolate or meat on Fridays), and instead of giving up some bad habit we want to get rid of (like smoking, drinking, swearing, or acting badly while driving), what if instead of giving up, we decided to “take on” something?

What if we were to personally take on the identity of Christ? What if we as a church decided corporately to take on the identity as the Body of Christ? How would that look? John Wesley, the founder of our Methodist Movement had three simple rules for the people called Methodist.

Wesley encouraged the early Methodists, and still today, to “Do No Harm; to Do Good; and to Stay in Love with God.” What if, in all our actions, we resolved to do no harm to other people? What if, in all our actions, thoughts and attitudes, we resolved to do good to as many people as we can, as often as we can? And what if we strived to stay in love with God all of the time? Not just on Sunday mornings, not just when we have our private devotions, but through the entire day? Just imagine how we would be changed. Imagine how the world would be changed.

You know, there aren’t enough satellites in the sky or microchips under the skin to keep track of all the bad behavior in the world. But what if the people called United Methodists took on the identity of Christ? The best tracking device would not be outside, but on the inside of each one of us.

When we invite Christ to come live within us and change our thinking, acting and feeling, we won’t need any spy cameras. We’ll know. The world will know. They will know we are Christians by our love. Amen? Amen!