As you probably know, the thing at the top of the bulletin insert is called the collect and it generally does two things. First it is sort of summarizes the readings and second it editorializes a bit, telling us what we are supposed to take from those readings. I don’t always follow its advice, but it’s always worth a look. Today the collect tells us that we are dealing with the Temptation of Jesus, saying, “Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan.” It then moves on to editorialize about how we need to be concerned with our own temptations remarking, “Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us.” Put in shorter terms today’s collect says: Jesus was tempted, and we need to be strengthened so as not to give into temptation. So, I’m going to go with that for today’s sermon.

The context of this temptation narrative is that Jesus was baptized and at the conclusion of the baptism, God the father acknowledges Jesus to be the Son of God. At this point the temptation comes, with Satan attempting to derail the whole thing. Since we are currently in Mark’s Gospel, the most succinct of all the Gospels, we are not given the actual temptations only told that Jesus, “Was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan.” And while it might be nice to have more details about the specifics, I am not sure they are completely necessary. We know that Satan is trying to gum up the works. Jesus is going in one direction and Satan wants him to go in another. If you want to get a little poetic about it, this is the, “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood” moment and Jesus needs to choose a road. We, of course, know that Jesus did not give in. He overcame whatever the temptations were that Satan meted out. But as the collect reminds us it is not just Jesus who is tempted but we are as well and so the question becomes how do we deal with that temptation. And that is what I would like to discuss for the next few moments. And in so doing I want to follow the model given by Mark and not go heavily into specific temptations but instead reflect on how and why we are to resist.

As we all know the problem with temptation is that it is so tempting. If the wrong path were presented as horrible and dispiriting no one would really have a problem resisting them. But that’s not how it works. Go back to the first temptation, the one in the Garden. When Satan tempts Eve with the fruit, we are told that Eve decided to take it, “when [she] saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes.” In other words, the fruit looked really good and as the wisdom of country music asks, “How can it be wrong when it feels so right?” But, of course, that is exactly the issue. Temptation is meant to bypass any sort of reason and reflection and go directly to our appetites and feelings. If it feels right, it might very well be temptation. I mean eating chocolate tends to offer more immediate gratification than eating kale. However, upon reflection we know that an all-chocolate diet is not a long-term solution for our health.

For some reason we don’t talk about temptation much these days, at least not in terms of it being a bad thing. I mean most of the advertising industry is predicated on bypassing our reason and making a product seem irresistible. Advertising generally tells us the equivalent of, “you know you want it.” But much of the witness of the Bible and morality in general is about not giving into such temptations. It is interesting that much of what we call virtue or morality is found as much in not doing things as it is in doing things. Our sins are a combination of stuff we should not have done and stuff we should have done. In around 590 AD the Church devised a list of the seven heavenly virtues. These virtues were: chastity, temperance, charity, diligence, kindness, patience and humility. Some of them require doing stuff like charity and diligence but many of them are more passive and are expressed by not doing something. Take a virtue like temperance. We tend to think of it as not drinking alcohol but it is better defined as moderation, self-restraint and controlling the desires of the flesh. It is looking at a plate of cookies and only having one. Or take patience. Patience is the capacity to accept or tolerate delay, trouble, or suffering without getting angry. It is not giving in to what our emotions are telling us to do. Our Christian walk is not just about doing, but it is also about not doing. Or put another way it is about resisting temptation. And we resist temptation not because we want to spoil a good time but rather because we are seeking what is best and so need to resist the mediocre and immediate.

C.S. Lewis said, “If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.” Think about this in terms of Jesus’ temptation. Had he given in and followed the path Satan offered our sins would not be forgiven. Jesus would have traded the restoration of creation for some fleeting earthly pleasures. But we are not Jesus and we do make such tradeoffs because, as C.S. Lewis says we are far too easily pleased. We willingly take short term pleasures in exchange for all the wonderful things that God has promised. So why do we keep doing it? I have a theory that I think explains at least a little bit of it.

Last week I spoke about the dearth of silence in our current world and it seems to me that there is a link between giving into temptation and noise. Here is why I say that. When we settle for the mediocre and unexceptional, we need distraction. We need to never have a chance to sit back and reflect but instead need to be given a constant stream of stimulation to keep us from too much thought. For if we reflect for too long, we might realize that all the temptations we give into are not that great. That is the distractions and trifles which fill our days are not the best things. When we think of temptation, it is important not to give them too great a status, because most temptations are not that exciting. In fact, most temptations are pretty pedestrian like eating too many Ho Hos or fighting for a Stanley Cup at Target. I heard the singer songwriter Paul Williams once say of his drug and alcohol addiction that after a bender he would not come out of it doing anything exciting but would instead find himself in the boy’s department of Sears trying on sweaters. There is an old line that Satan does not need to come up with new temptations because the old ones work just fine. That is, no mater how sophisticated we may think we are when compared to the rubes who came before, we are all still susceptible to the same base allures. Maybe these allures are for a little ease, maybe they are for a fleeting pleasure or a little status. But there is a reason one of the names for Satan is the great deceiver because most of what he offers is mediocre at best. We trade the Glory of God for something that might be okay. But as our collect reminds us, we are to be strengthened to not give in so that we may be God’s own this day and forevermore.