Sunday, March 4, 1990
THE FIRST TEMPTATIONS OF CHRIST
Psalm 130; Matthew 4:1-11

A year or two ago, a controversial movie titled The Last Temptation of Christ caused quite a stir in many towns and cities across the country. I personally did not see the movie, although I did read a number of reviews, and I can't remember what the writers of the script thought the last temptation of Christ was.

Whatever it was, the story just read from Matthew's Gospel is about the first temptations Jesus faced, and they were significant ones. Parenthetically, there's always been a debate among theologians and others who profess to know something about Jesus as to whether or not he was ever really tempted. Usually, the two sides to the argument go something like this: one group says, "Jesus was not able to sin," while the other group claims, "He was able not to sin."

To put it another way — if Jesus' will was so attuned to God's that he was not able to sin, then it seems to me it is clear that he was not really tempted. On the other hand, if he was capable of sin, even as you and I are, but didn't give in to the temptations, then he was truly tempted.

My own personal view, and I'm convinced that the Bible supports it, is that Jesus was tempted in the same way, and I believe in an even greater way, than you and I are tempted. And that's what this story in Matthew's Gospel is all about — the agony of temptation, which is the agony of choice. The Book of Hebrews in the New Testament describes Jesus in this way: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning" (Hebrews 4:15).

Is there anyone here this morning, or who is listening on the radio or watching on television, who has not faced the agony of choice — who has not faced temptation? To be sure, our choices, our temptations, might not have been of the same magnitude as those facing Jesus. But we know what temptation is. We can resonate with this story.

Before we consider in more depth these three temptations which Jesus faced, there are several comments that need to be made that apply to all three temptations.

Note that Matthew says — and Luke and Mark say the same — Jesus was led up by the Spirit (that is, the Holy Spirit or God's Spirit) into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He was led by the Spirit. And he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward, he was hungry.

"He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness." The story is not saying that Jesus was tempted because he was departing from God's will. Rather, Jesus was tempted in the process of trying to determine what God's will was for his life and ministry. Jesus was in the desert because he was led there by the Spirit. It is usually the obedient and not the disobedient who are struggling, being opposed, and tested.

Notice also that temptation indicates strength, not weakness. We are usually tempted to do that which is within our capacity. And the greater one's capacities, the greater are the temptations. The fierceness of the desert struggle is a testimony to Jesus' power. The tempter doesn't want to waste time on weaklings. It is the very, very good who are tempted, not the borderline good.

One more comment needs to be made about the really big temptations that came to Jesus and that come to us. They do not usually involve an obvious or undisguised evil. For example, most of us are never tempted to commit armed robbery. But there's plenty of skimming of large sums of money that goes on that is not at all obvious and is well disguised. In fact, those doing the skimming have probably convinced themselves that they are doing nothing wrong and, in fact, may have convinced themselves that they are doing good. The worst evil is always done in the name and under the banner of good. In the savings & loan scandals that keep coming to light in our time, don't you suppose that many of the people who were responsible told themselves that they were doing good? And they further convinced themselves that what they were doing was legal. However, simply because something is legal does not mean it is always morally right.

The most dangerous and alluring temptations are those when we convince ourselves that the endeavors are reasonable and promise good results before we put our minds and hands to them.

"Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." Now, lest you be misled by some popular pictures of the devil as a horned creature with a fiendish face, carrying a pitchfork in his hands — this is not the kind of tempter Jesus was confronting in Matthew.

Let's take a little side trip here and talk about the devil for a moment. There's a lot of fascination with the devil. Have you ever wondered why so many colleges and universities use some form of the devil as an athletic mascot? Somewhere I read that there are at least 21 senior and junior colleges that do this. These schools range from the DePaul Blue Demons and the Duke Blue Devils to the Dillard University Devilettes and the Wake Forest Demon Deacons. I've never thought of deacons as demons. There are a number of American manufacturing companies that also use the devil in their trade names. There are at least three "Red Devil" companies, while 14 other products carry the name "devil" somewhere.

In spite of this, perhaps the devil needs to be introduced to some of you who may think you have not met him or her. There are also some of you for whom your devil is too small.

Here are four brief comments about the devil that will help:

First of all, the devil is usually pictured as a person because evil is experienced as an intensely personal power in the same way that God is experienced as a personal power.

Second, we need to think of the devil as having a separate existence not because evil exists outside of us, but because evil is both in us and is also something greater than us.

Third, the devil is often described as a fallen angel because the worst evil does not come out of our so-called lower nature, but in our spiritual nature, always seeking to corrupt the highest that is in us.

Fourth, the devil is exceedingly subtle, rarely suggesting that we do anything bad, but invariably suggesting that we do something quite reasonable, that which is disguised as good. And that's precisely what is going on in this story of the first temptation of Jesus.

Jesus is wrestling with what the will of God is for him in his ministry, and he is presented with three very attractive avenues. All three have immense possibilities for the good. Remember the temptation facing Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden as described in the Book of

Genesis. The serpent promises them that if they eat of the forbidden tree, they will be like God. What higher goal could one have? There is no hint of sin or shame in that.

Jesus had before him three intriguing offers — the first, to turn these stones into bread. Remember, Jesus was very hungry. He had not eaten for forty days. But it was not only to satisfy his own physical hunger that made the temptation so powerful. In a world of unbelievable hunger, why not feed the people? All around him, people were starving. How can he preach good news to the poor if they are hungry? Wouldn't it be difficult to say to a bunch of starving people, "I am the bread of life; those who come to me shall never hunger?"

The temptation was very real. Satisfy people's physical needs first. Yet deep down, Jesus knew that food to satisfy physical hunger is never enough. "We do not live by bread alone." Jesus may also have remembered the Old Testament story of the children of Israel. It was only after they were filled with manna that the Israelites rebelled. Only after their stomachs were full did they doubt their high calling.

Like us, Jesus sometimes had his doubts. Was he really the Son of God? Note that the tempter prefaced both the first and second temptations with that teasing question: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread."

Thus, the second temptation was similar to the first in that it was about his calling, his identity. Remember, not too many days before that, Jesus had been baptized and had heard a voice from heaven assuring him that he was indeed God's chosen one. "If you are the Son of God, then throw yourself down."

The second temptation was also to test God. Jesus wondered, "Will God always be there for me? Why not find out? Jump off from the pinnacle of the temple and see if God will protect me. And then, if something happens, I can blame God. It will be God's fault, not mine."

This is a temptation for all of us. We want to either blame God or the devil and avoid personal responsibility for our choices.

But Jesus would not turn over responsibility for his actions to anyone else. He refused to jump off the pinnacle of the temple.

Like the first temptation, the second one, to jump off the pinnacle of the temple, also has social implications. What a crowd-pleaser. Suppose Jesus jumped off and didn't get hurt, and certainly the crowd would be impressed to see a cluster of angels come from out of nowhere to catch Jesus just before he hit the ground. Wouldn't that prove to the people that he was God's chosen one? People love drama and sensationalism, but Jesus knew it wouldn't produce committed followers.

He responded to the tempter with the words, "It is written, you shall not tempt the Lord your God." A good paraphrase of his response is, "You shall not try to force the hand of God to work in the way you think God ought to work."

The third temptation in the desert has the tempter taking Jesus to a high place and showing him all the kingdoms of the world. "All these I will give to you," said the devil, "if you will fall down and worship me."

Here's the temptation to enter the political arena and save the world in that way. In a world of slavery, war, hunger, oppression, and disregard for life and rights, why not?

You see, the devil is always urging us to be realistic, to be reasonable, to compromise our calling, to use questionable means to accomplish good ends.

But Jesus refused. He knew that the kingdoms of the world and the glory thereof were not the devil's to give to anyone. God had not turned the world over to the devil. Jesus also knew that God and God alone is to be worshipped. The worship of anything else always leads to trouble.

All three temptations have something in common. They are temptations to take a shortcut to satisfy a dominating desire — a shortcut to try to accomplish God's will.

Jesus' temptations did not end once he left the desert. Again and again, he was tested. Determining and trying to do God's will is never easy for any of us. But with God's help, it can be done. The story even promises that angels will minister to us. Amen.