

Of the temptations of Jesus that we have encountered this morning, the one that I would like to focus upon occurs on the pinnacle of the Temple. The Gospel from Matthew tells us that the devil, which both Jews and Greeks saw as the physical manifestation of evil, the devil "took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple...."

This suggests to me that in the temptation experience we have a sense of being out of control, of losing control, of being vulnerable and perhaps out of our depth with some force that is luring us, attracting us, persuading us to behaviors that are contrary to our most noble of intentions, our highest humanity.

In the wilderness, we are told, Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights and he was famished. Out of his depth. Exposed. Desperate for food. Jesus forty days and forty nights in the wilderness recalls the forty years of Israel's wandering. His testing there recalls the wilderness testing of the children of Israel. And now the evil manifestation-- after tempting him with the thought of turning stones into bread-- places Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple in the holy city, the highest point of that edifice built for YHWH.

And the tempter said to Jesus, *If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written "He will command his angels concerning you," and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."* These are quotations from Psalm 91. The tempter can quote scripture.

And now the Tempter says, *Throw yourself down....* While some might see this temptation as a temptation to pride, I see this temptation as embodying self destructive violence. Throw yourself down. Go ahead. Yield to the impulse to use violence and to use it self-destructively. Even upon yourself.

The American Psychological Association defines violence as *an extreme form of aggression, such as assault, rape or murder. It says "Violence has many causes, including frustration, exposure to violent media, violence in the home or neighborhood and a tendency to see other people's actions as hostile even when they're not. Certain situations also increase the risk of aggression, such as drinking, insults and other provocations and environmental factors like heat and overcrowding. "*

Our society is bathed in thoughts, images, suggestions, strategies, myths of violence and of violent behavior. Most of it is directed against someone else. At other times it is simply directed against the self.

A simple scrolling of my television choices on most evenings provides me with many films dedicated to showing or predicated upon some instance of violence. Even the most tame murder mysteries assume violence and the plot proceeds in response to some act of off-screen violent behavior.

Resolutions from the American Psychological Association concerning violent video games point out that scientific research has demonstrated an association "between violent video game use and ... increases in aggressive behavior" aggressive emotions and thought and decreases in empathy and in moral engagement. They also point out "the persistence of negative outcomes over time" when it comes to violent video game use.

Here is a temptation that we may not at first associate with Jesus on the Temple, but it is all around us: the temptation to armed conflict, the temptation to suicidal ideation and behavior, the temptation to mass destruction, the temptation to bathe in violent scenes of destructive behavior via the media. The temptation to settle things with fists, with knives, with guns. With nuclear warheads.

The recent vandalism of Jewish cemeteries or the bomb threats to the Jewish community across our land is not something for casual indifference. In terms of relationships, 1 in 4 women and 1 in 7 men will experience severe physical violence by

an intimate partner in their lifetime. A simple search online will yield many other statistics of the impact of violence upon our lives.

But for a moment let us leave that external world for the world of our own internal self thoughts and self messages. Philipp Moffatt, in an article "Violence against Self" in the Yoga Journal (2007), points out how we might be violent towards ourselves internally. He writes:

Initially, you may not identify some of your daily thoughts and decisions as moments of violence to self, but most likely they are.

If someone was hitting you in your stomach, squeezing your neck, or not letting you breathe, you'd quickly call such behavior violent. Yet when these same painful sensory experiences arise in reaction to your own thoughts or actions, you fail to recognize your behavior as violent.

He goes on to say:

One of these discoveries is the degree to which we make life difficult for ourselves by being violent or violating to the body and the mind in the routine of our daily lives. Through the way in which we schedule our time, push our bodies, and compare and judge ourselves against others, we repeatedly create an inner environment that is filled with violence. If you can understand that this is so, it may have a profound impact on your experience of life being difficult.

On the pinnacle, Jesus was tempted to be violent towards himself. And so are we.

Psalms 32 this morning speaks of the importance of acknowledging our sin. We read together that the Psalmist acknowledged the psalmist's sin and did not conceal guilt. The result comes a few verses later when we read *You are my hiding place. You preserve me from trouble. You surround me with shouts of deliverance.*

As we begin our Lenten journey which includes self examination and repentance, let us consider our own violence. It may be our love affair with violence in the media. But it also may well be our own internal violence. Maybe we also are vulnerable to the internal message of negativity that whispers in our ear *throw yourself down.*

Let us examine the ways in which we push ourselves, chastise ourselves, strain for perfectionism, engage in cruel self talk. And let us instead turn towards the source of Love -- that source of light and life whose Spirit embraces us and will not let us go. Let us follow that source, reflect on that source, open ourselves up in the presence of

that source. It is as the Psalmist says *Great are the tribulations of the wicked; but mercy embraces those who trust in the LORD.* Let us trust the LORD with our time, our schedules, our mental traffic, our spirit, our selves.

In the name of God -- Father, Son and Holy Spirit -- Amen.