The Temptation of Christ in the wilderness.

We couldn’t have come up with a better reading to open our Lenten sermons which will be informed by CS Lewis’ *The Screwtape Letters*. These books are written from the perspective of Uncle Screwtape: a senior demon, writing letters of advice to his fledgling demon nephew Wormwood on how to win “converts”.

Screwtape, that talented devil, tells his nephew: “It is funny how mortals always picture devils as putting things into their minds…”*

It is tempting to think about temptation as something that comes from outside of us, something placed on our path by some “other”, a devil if you will. If we can then focus our minds on the devil without, we will ignore the temptation within.

Temptation only works when we don’t realize why we are being tempted.

Thomas Keating theorizes that temptation takes one of three forms: the temptation to be secure, the temptation to be esteemed or loved, and the temptation to control.

The Fry household has been robbed 5 times in the last 3 years. Twice in the last month. I’m not saying this to elicit sympathy, but to set the stage. It would be tempting to think “Poor me. No one has it as bad as I do.”

That’s actually not true. Many, many people are robbed every day. We live in a city, with many addicted and desperate people, and that’s what
happens when people live so close to the margin, and so close in proximity. It is not “poor me”.

We have another employee here that was also recently robbed. And I have heard many stories in the last few weeks about many others who have been robbed. The universe is not picking on the Fry’s. The Fry’s just live in the same world as everyone else. I will not be tempted to participate in my own pity party.

Keating’s “esteem and affection”. Whew. Dodged that temptation!

Greg and I have talked about moving. We think, “Let’s just chuck this whole thing, take a loss, and move somewhere in Little Rock that’s “safe.”

Now, where exactly would that be?

If we moved, there is not guarantee that we won’t be robbed again. I have friends who live in more upscale parts of town, another who lives in a gated community. Both have been robbed.

And we know, logically, we can’t afford to move. We like our neighborhood and our neighbors. A new place would just be a new place, and not necessarily the panacea we think it will be. A new location would come with its own set of challenges.

Control. We have determined that as much as we would like to believe we are in control, we are never fully in control. Keating’s “control”, somewhat dodged.

We're tempted to just put a sign on the door saying come on in, take what you want. On the other hand, we're also tempted to get run out and get a Rottweiler, or perhaps TWO Rottweiler’s. Maybe we should just get a gun.

But we know we wouldn't use a gun, and we don't want the Rottweilers to eat our cats. But we want to be secure.

I'm going to say something out of the box here. I believe temptations alert us that there is something in our soul that needs our attention. Temptations
serve a purpose: to make us think, to make us grapple in a *conscious* way with our sometimes *unconscious* needs. Some of these needs are valid; some are not. Temptations get our attention. Temptations say we need to look at some issue in our life seriously. If we don't look at it consciously, we run the risk of merely reacting to stimulus, rather than allowing ourselves to reflect before we act.

Satan, the tester, wins the battle if we only see temptation as something that comes from outside ourselves, as separate from ourselves. Satan, that tester, loves it when we concentrate on how awful the temptation is, how *alluring* the temptation is, getting us to focus solely on the temptation, rather than having us look at what the temptation might stem from.

Satan would rather we **react** than **reflect**.

Jesus understood that trap. He saw the the destructiveness of the temptations he was offered, but-- more important-- he understood the underlying causes that made them so enticing: the temptation to be secure, the temptation to be esteemed and loved, and the temptation to control.

Jesus knew that life wasn't secure. Our lives are not without risk, and his life was not without risk. One of the great paradoxes in life is that we are free, but not secure. We will never be fully secure in this world, but we can be free. We can be free of the need to be always secure, because we are secure that we rest in God. And Jesus knew that too.

We will never be loved by everyone. No one ever has been. Even Jesus. It’s a humbling thing to realize. But we can love everyone.

And control. Ah control. Control is an illusion. The tester would like us to think we are in control. It makes us so much easier to.. well, control. Jesus knew his urge to control the outcome of everything was important to him, but it was more important to acknowledge that God’s plan is bigger than all of us.
And what did the Fry's learn when we reflected rather than reacted? We learned that we are not ever going to be in control of other people's choices, and whether they choose to rob or not.

We learned that we would like --at some point-- to look at other houses, but that we aren't going to do it hurriedly or because we have to. We will do it when we can afford to, on our own timeline. Not because of fear.

We will take seriously the temptation to get a gun or a pack of dogs, but we will instead install new security doors and get a security system. Most of all, we will let this go. We will try and remember that no matter what happens, we are God's.

The tester would rather we react to temptation rather than reflect on the motives underlying our temptations. Take a breath, Jesus seems to say, and try and understand why you are feeling tempted.

Take temptations seriously. Look them full in the face, and reflect and ask for clarity. They have something to teach us about ourselves. They are not coming from outside us; they are coming from inside us.

The master demon Screwtape reminds his nephew:

“It is funny how mortals always picture [temptors] as putting things into their minds: in reality our best work is done by keeping things out.”*

Amen.

*Screwtape Letters, C.S.Lewis, p.20