

**Sermon preached by Pastor Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 1, 2007**

THE LAST TEMPTATION

Mark 15:21-32

It has been nearly 20 years now since the release of acclaimed Hollywood director Martin Scorsese's controversial film "*The Last Temptation of Christ*." Based on a 1950s novel by Greek author Nikos Kazantzakis, the movie, you may recall, sparked significant controversy and loud protests from many Christians and Christian groups for its non-biblical portrayal of Jesus, and especially for its suggestion that as He hung on the cross Jesus was tempted in a vision from Satan (the deceiver who often disguises himself as an angel of light) to give up His messianic destiny and to live out His life as a normal man by marrying Mary Magdalene, raising a family, and spending the remainder of His life in peace and quiet, away from the public eye.

In this vision on the cross (you will understand, I think, why this provoked such controversy and protests), Jesus imagines Himself having sexual relations with Mary Magdalene. We need to pause right here to consider that, according to the words of Jesus Himself in the Sermon on the Mount, this would have made Jesus guilty of sin, guilty of committing adultery or *porneia* (sexual immorality) in His heart, for He said that anyone who looks lustfully at a woman has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5:28).

Contrary to what "*The Last Temptation of Christ*" asserts, though He was a vigorous, sexual man – because He was fully man – and subject to every kind of temptation, just as we are, including sexual temptation, the Jesus of the Bible never committed adultery in His heart or mind. Never. Not only did Jesus never treat a woman in a dishonorable way, not only did He never touch a woman in a dishonorable way, He never looked at a woman or thought about a woman in a dishonorable way.

Was He tempted? You bet He was. In every way, the Bible says (Hebrews 4:15), just as we are. But as we noted a few Sundays ago, though He can sympathize with us when we experience temptation, and though He understands temptation inside and out because He has been tempted in every way, just like us, there is one crucial difference. Jesus never sinned. Jesus never gave in to temptation. He stood firm and strong and true and "was without sin" in all the temptations He had to face.

"Tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin." That's what the Bible says about Jesus. But that is not the way it is for you and me. I know it isn't true in my life. And I'm pretty sure about all of you, too. That is why the author of Hebrews, knowing our weakness and how prone we are to give in to temptation, despite our best intentions, invites us in Hebrews 4:16 to "approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

Though we so often fail in the face of temptation, Jesus never did.

To go back to the movie: In the end, after the scenario plays out in His mind, Jesus rejects the temptation to abandon the cross for a “normal life” with Mary Magdalene and summons the resolve to complete His redemptive mission.

The temptation to leave the cross for a quiet, peaceful, “normal” life was, according to both the Kazantzakis novel and the film version by Martin Scorsese, “the last temptation of Christ.”

I want you to know I’ve never seen the movie or read the book. I don’t intend to. And I’m nor recommending that you do so either.

What I want to say today as we begin Holy Week and once more focus on the suffering and death of Christ for us is that “*The Last Temptation of Christ*” didn’t get it quite right. It was not wrong in suggesting that Jesus may have been subject to temptation even as He hung on the cross. But it is clearly wrong, from all I have read about the book and film, in some of its assumptions about Jesus – unbiblical assumptions about who Jesus really was and is, and about His awareness and understanding of His identity as the Son of God. And it is wrong, too, I think, about the nature of “the last temptation” of Jesus.

Let me say this again: Jesus was no stranger to temptation. He was subject to temptations of all kinds, just like we are, all through His life. He experienced ordinary, everyday temptations, the kind you and I experience as we go about our daily routines and encounter the ordinary difficulties of life.

Jesus also experienced times of intense temptation, as when He spent 40 days alone in the desert right after He was baptized by John, when Satan came and took his best shot at Him. Both Matthew 4 and Luke 4 describe that time of temptation in the desert. Trying to capitalize on Jesus’ hunger, Satan first tempted Jesus to use His divine power for His personal benefit, to meet His own needs. Then Satan resorted to quoting Scripture in an attempt to get Jesus to test God and the trustworthiness of His promises. Finally, Satan offered Jesus a shortcut to power and authority over all the kingdoms of the world. All Jesus had to do was to bow down and give Satan the worship that belongs to God alone.

In each case, we know, Jesus resisted temptation by answering Satan with the Word of God. He resisted by appealing to the truth and authority of God’s inspired, unerring and infallible Word, which is just as true and relevant and authoritative today as it was 2,000 years ago.

When these temptations were over, it says in Luke 4:13, the devil left Jesus until an opportune time. This does not mean it was the only time Jesus was tempted. Could He have been tempted when, after He fed the 5,000, the people were ready to come and make Him king by force? I think so. But knowing their intentions, He got away by Himself, the Bible tells us in John 6:15. No doubt so He could keep focused on His mission.

In Mark 8, after telling His disciples that suffering, rejection and death awaited Him, Jesus heard the voice of Satan when Peter tried to rebuke Him for saying such things. He said to Peter: “Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of man” (Mark 8:33). Jesus knew that Satan could work even through one of His disciples to try to distract or derail Him from completing His mission.

And then in Gethsemane, in the Garden on the night before His crucifixion, knowing the cross was on the horizon, Jesus was tempted to look for a way out. And who can blame Him?

But I believe the last temptation of Jesus took place not in Gethsemane, nor when He stood on trial before the Sanhedrin or Pontius Pilate. I believe the last temptation of Jesus took place while He hung on the cross with nails piercing His hands and feet, as He listened to the mocking and taunting and jeering of those who passed by the place of His crucifixion, hurling their insults, shouting their invective at Him, and to the religious trash-talking of the Jewish leaders as they exchanged high-fives with one another and gleefully celebrated what they thought was their victory over Jesus.

Some of those who passed by mockingly dared Him to “come down from the cross and save (Himself)” (Mark 15:30). The religious leaders taunted Him by saying: “He saved others but He can’t save Himself!” (15:31). They too dared Him to come down from the cross if He really was the Messiah, if He was really the King of Israel. “Show us,” they said, “and then we’ll all become believers.”

Do you know what I mean when I say this was the last temptation of Jesus? It was the temptation to show them, all right, and to put all of those mockers and taunters and trash-talkers, all of those who were reveling in His humiliation, whether they were religious or irreligious – to put them all in their place. To show them His power and His righteous wrath. Once and for all.

David McKenna says:

It is a wonder that the heavens did not break open at that moment with a show of force that would make the chief priests and scribes eat sand. Jesus certainly had to be humanly tempted to pray that God would make the moment of His coming with power and glory an immediate event. Instead, He remembers the cup from which He must drink in order to be the ransom for the sins of many (Mark 10:45). If He saves Himself, others He cannot save.

Jesus could have saved Himself by destroying His enemies. They were wrong in saying He couldn’t save Himself, because He did have the power. He could have destroyed His enemies and delivered Himself in an instant. He could have come down from the cross in response to their taunts. And who could have blamed Him?

He could have. He had the power. But He didn’t. He wouldn’t. And the truth is that He could not save Himself and still accomplish the purpose for which He came. If He were

to complete His mission as the Messiah, He could not save Himself. His death on the cross was necessary for our salvation.

Jesus could have come down from the cross. He could have given those who were mocking and blaspheming Him what they deserved. But as William Booth said: “It is precisely because Jesus did not come down from the cross that we believe in Him.” Strong as the temptation must have been, Jesus did not give in to it. He had you and me in mind, and a mission to accomplish that only He could fulfill. Because He did not come down from the cross, because He endured the cross and scorned its shame (Hebrews 12:3) all the way to the end, we look to Him as our Savior and Lord.

In the movie “*Stranger Than Fiction*,” Will Ferrell plays an IRS auditor named Harold Crick who discovers that he is the main character in a writer’s (played by Emma Thompson) latest novel. He is thrown off-balance when he finds himself the subject of narration that only he can hear. His whole life takes on a sense of urgency when he learns that the writer is planning his death in her novel. With the help of a literary professor (Dustin Hoffman), Harold meets the novelist, who decides to change the ending of her novel to save his life.

When the professor asks the novelist why she changed the ending of the book, she says: “Lots of reasons. I realized I just couldn’t do it.”

“Because he’s real?” the professor asks.

“Because it’s a book about a man who doesn’t know he’s about to die and then dies,” she explains. “But if the man does know he’s going to die and dies anyway, dies willingly, knowing he could stop it, then... I mean... isn’t that the type of man you want to keep alive?”

My friends, Jesus knew He was going to die and He died anyway. He died willingly, knowing He could have stopped it at any moment. But, thank God, He did not stop it. To save us, He could not save Himself. To save you – and me – He did not save Himself.

And though He died – willingly, sacrificially, redemptively – I can tell you that His death on the cross was not the end of the story. I’m jumping ahead a little bit now. On the third day He rose again from the dead, and He is alive – today and forever – on the basis of the power of an indestructible life (Hebrews 7:16).

Praise God for Jesus! And never, ever forget what He willingly endured, out of love, for you.

Lord, let it be so. Amen.