

### SO MANY TEMPTATIONS

Every year the Westport Library encourages all our town's residents to participate in Westport READS and read the same book. Throughout the month of March, various activities which explore different aspects of the book are scheduled.

This year the Library has chosen Frank L. Baum's classic tale of munchkins and flying monkeys, *The Wizard of Oz*. It is a book most of us are familiar with, not because we've read the original text, but because we've seen the 1939 movie starring Judy Garland as Dorothy. I encourage you to read the book—you'll be surprised by some of the differences! In the book, for instance, Dorothy wears Silver Shoes, not Ruby Red Slippers.

For now, though, I remind you of that great movie. I'm too young to have seen it in the theatres, but every year, during my childhood, it was shown on television. I've seen it at least 15 or so times, I'm sure.

It has some great lines—my favorite is "I'm melting!"—and some very delightful performances. Garland as Dorothy, Ray Bolger as the Scarecrow, Jack Haley as the Tin Man, Bert Lahr as the Cowardly Lion, Frank Morgan as the Wizard and Margaret Hamilton as the Wicked Witch of the West.

Hamilton had other roles, but probably, aside from the Witch, she was best known as Cora, the innkeeper pushing Maxwell House Coffee. And Bert Lahr also found a home in commercials. He will be forever linked with Lay's Potato Chips. Remember those ads? Holding a bright yellow bag of the salty morsels, he'd attempt to limit his consumption of the chips, but then eventually would cave, and devour them all, as the announcer would say "Lays Potato Chips—Betcha Can't Eat Just One!"

Ah yes, temptation it seems to surround us, doesn't it? Everywhere you turn there is something or someone trying to lure you into doing something you shouldn't.

One of my favorite comic strips is Doug Marlette's *Kudzu*. The strip chronicles life in the fictional town of Bypass, North Carolina. The main character is a young man named Kudzu, who suffers from low self-esteem. Frequently he consults with his friend and confidant the Rev. Will B. Dunn, who is called by young and old alike, Preacher.

In one strip Kudzu and the good reverend are out for a walk. In the first frame Kudzu says:

"Being a minster must be really hard, huh, preacher? I mean, living for others, leading an exemplary life? That's a lot of responsibility. The pressures must be tremendous! Having to

set a good example . . . People watching, waiting for one false move, one sign of human frailty they can jump on . . . I don't know how you can handle it! . . . “

The preacher thinks for a moment, then responds, “I stay home a lot!”

Of course, in the end, that doesn't work either. For there are temptations there as well. When you need to lose weight—what can be more tempting than a well-stocked refrigerator? When you should be doing homework—what can be more tempting than a Playstation 3 loaded with a new video game? When you want to stay sober—what can be more tempting than the liquor cabinet? When you wrestle with thoughts of infidelity—what can be more tempting than internet porn? And the list goes on. No even “staying home “ won't free us from the reality that ours is a world where temptation lies around every corner. Indeed, part of what it means to be human is to face temptation.

And that is precisely what our gospel reading is all about. Throughout history all human beings, even Jesus, have had to face temptation.

One of the important things to note about this story is that temptation and sin are not one in the same. That one will be tempted is inevitable. One cannot avoid it. But it is no sin to be tempted. Being tempted and committing sin are two different things. The issue is not whether one will face temptation: that will happen, guaranteed. No the issue is what one does about it. As Angelo says to Escalus in Shakespeare's play *Measure for Measure*: “Tis one thing to be tempted Escalus, another thing to fall.” (Act II, Scene 1)

If then we can count on having to face temptation, how can we avoid falling prey to its lure? How can we steer clear of sin?

The story about Jesus in the wilderness does provide some guidelines that prove helpful.

Note that Matthew begins his version of the story by telling us “Jesus was led by the Spirit” I could bring this sermon to a quick conclusion by simply saying something like “if we also allow ourselves to be led by God's spirit, we will be able to deal with temptation.” I could say that, say Amen, and sit down, for it is true that the one sure way we can face temptation head on and not be blown away is by relying on God's Spirit to lead us, to guide us.

But I think it would be more helpful to you if I were to expand on that simple statement.

In our Capital Campaign literature and presentations we have noted many times our commitment to twelve-step programs. Indeed, there are over fifty twelve-step groups that meet in our building every week. Some help folks cope with alcohol, others help those who are tempted by money, and still others help those who deal with issues surrounding food. Bert Lahr's ad was cute, but the reality is some folks can't eat just one. They are compulsive

overeaters. And the temptation to eat and eat and eat some more is overwhelming. But in OA, Overeaters Anonymous, one of the types of twelve-step groups that meet here each week, they have found the help they need. And they have found that help by learning how to rely on a Higher Power, the one we would call God, to lead them, guide them, give them strength.

The twelve-step slogan, “Let go, and let God” points to the reality that if one has a problem like compulsive overeating, the one sure way to deal with it is to allow God to lead you—to allow God to take control of your life and your problems. In steps one and two, members of OA and other twelve step programs first, acknowledge that they have a problem and that it is out of hand, and second, recognize “that a Power greater than [them]selves” can help them out. They are then in a position to take the third step: “We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.”

Being a compulsive overeater, or an alcoholic, or a co-dependent, is not a sin. Being tempted by potato chips or alcohol or internet porn is not a sin. But refusing to deal with those problems can and does lead to sinful actions. The twelve-step approach helps meet temptation and beat it back on a way similar to the way of Jesus. Compulsive overeaters in OA, alcoholics in AA, co-dependents in Al-Anon have decided to “turn their will and their lives over to the care of God.” Like Jesus they have agreed to being “led by the Spirit.”

One of the real issues for many folks in OA is body image. They have bought into the cultural standard that says you must be rail thin to be considered attractive. Many in OA are bulimics—those who compulsively overeat, and then purge. Until OA they have suffered from a never ending cycle of bingeing and purging.

I recently read an article written by a woman who is a recovering bulimic. She has come to rely on the twelve-step approach, and is now allowing God to help her deal with the temptations she faces. But it has been a long hard road. A real wilderness at times.

“I don’t like to have my picture taken,” she writes. “I cannot stand to have anyone look at what I see as a disgusting person.”

“One day, as I was gathering laundry from my daughter’s room, I found a picture of myself under my youngest daughter’s bed. I had torn it up and thrown it away months before, but there it was, wrinkled but carefully taped back together. When I questioned her about where she got it, my daughter answered, ‘the trash.’ When I asked her why, she said she did it so [that] . . . [W]hen she was upset, scared, or hurt thinking about ‘stuff,’ she liked to look at my picture, see my beautiful face and feel my love.”

**“Sometimes,” the writer concludes, “when my vision of myself is distorted by this eating disorder that consumes and twists all my senses, I have to step back and see myself through other’s eyes—those of my children, my friends and my Higher Power (my God).” (*Lifeline*, 2-08, 4)**

**In the story of Jesus in the wilderness, Jesus is tempted to see himself in some distorted fashion. He is tempted to see himself as the political ruler of the world, as a magician conjuring up bread from stones, as someone able to jump from high places and go unscathed . . . but when he stops to remember how God sees him, when he places his trust in God’s guidance, he is able to beat back those temptations.**

**Sisters and brothers, being tempted is part of being human. Like Bert Lahr we can try to avoid it by sheer will power, but that won’t always work. Like the Rev. Will B. Dunn, we can try to avoid it by staying home a lot—but ultimately that won’t work. We will still be tempted. That is no sin. The issue is how we handle it. But God, who is as close to us as ruby red slippers on our feet, stands ready to help us in that effort. This Lent, let us recommit ourselves to being led by the Spirit—for surely there is no shortage of wilderness.**

**Amen  
John H. Danner**