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St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
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Evensong for Lent 1

Have you ever said to your spouse something like, "If you really loved me, you'd clean up the garage today"? or "If you *really* loved me, you'd buy me a new car"? How about the child refused a new X-Box: "You don't love me, Mommy!" What about a prayer like "Oh, God, if you'll only make me lose ten pounds I promise I'll worship you forever." Well, that's not God's way. And, deep down, it shouldn't be our way.

We know, at least intellectually, that love cannot be bought. That the truest love is love given freely. That we cannot be held hostage by true, refined love. Love cannot be forced, we can't be cajoled into loving, our truest affection can't be gained by gifts.

If we model our love for one another on God's love, we will know that true love is freely given and freely received. We can't force God to love us – God already does!

There are certainly times when I wish God were just a little bit more evident in the world. I mean, it wouldn't have taken much for God to simply flick Saddam Hussein off his throne of power – think of the lives of American military and Iraqi's that would have been saved! Think how many people might have turned to God in gratitude! One little lightning bolt – surely that couldn't be too much to ask. (Of course, in moments of weakness I might like to send just a few more lightning bolts to various people in power, but...that's another story.)

God doesn't work like that. God has granted us freedom. We have freedom to hate as well as freedom to love. We have freedom to wage war as well as freedom to wage peace. We have freedom to feed the poor or to ignore them. Freedom to embrace justice and freedom to encourage division. It's up to us.

God loves us when we're tempted – maybe even more when we resist. God has given us the freedom to resist and to surrender to temptation. We pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Or "Put us not to the

test, and be with us in our time of great temptation.” God knows that we’re tempted, and God is with us, the Holy Spirit urging us to resist.

And so the Gospel message this evening shows us Jesus as a model, a model for our own lives. We must remember that we do not live by bread alone – that the Word is very near us, yearning to feed us spiritual strength. We must remember that our own power is useless when it comes to serving God – that attending to God strips us of our earthly trappings and makes us all equal at the banquet. And we must remember that God is not one to be tested. That God gives love freely, without qualification, that God’s love cannot be bought or sold or coerced, that it simply *is*.

I’m convinced that ninety-nine percent of us are addicted to something. Chocolate, alcohol, blaming others, shopping, self-pity, “winning”. A simple definition of addiction is something that fills our empty space.

That empty space, if we really think about it, belongs to God. And when we are addicted, we’ve replaced God. The object

of our addiction becomes God. But we do not live by bread alone – God is always ready to fill that space.

There's something about the temptations of Christ that makes me recall messages we see on TV: Buy now, pay later! Nothing down and only 49.95 a month! NOOOOOO finance charge! Zero percent APR until May 2009! Wow. All that *stuff* out there that I could have and not pay a single thing for it...well, until May of 2009.

And it's all such hype. We all know, or I hope we do, and I hope we teach our children this, that nothing in *this* world is free. That if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. That "buy now, pay later" really means what it says.

Satan knew how to tempt. Satan told Eve, "Taste this and you will be like god!" Wow – now *there's* a temptation! Eve, of course, fell for it, and then Adam did, too, and then they both knew that they'd done wrong, for when God asked, "What happened?!?" Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the snake and they knew they were naked and, well, you know the rest... Good ol' Satan, he knew what he was doing...

But when it came to Jesus, he had a new adversary.

Jesus came out of the water of baptism, cleansed, touched by the Holy Spirit, knowing that he was the chosen Son of God, and he departed to the wilderness to fast for forty days.

Now fasting in the wilderness is not really all that uncommon. A forty-day fast is probably more than any of us could bear, but fasting itself, surrendering our control to the hand of God, well, that's a time-tested and trusted spiritual discipline that people have practiced for centuries. It brings one down to basics – what do I *really* need? what do I *really* care about? what comforts are required so that I might *live*? what am I afraid of? do I trust myself? do I trust God?