

The First Sunday in Lent

St. Matthew 4:1-11: "Satan Tempts with a Cross-Free Life."

February 17/18, 2018 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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O Lord Jesus Christ, who fasted forty days and forty nights in the wilderness and overcame all the temptations of the devil, we thank You that for our salvation You were in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin, and as our merciful High Priest can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; and we pray, give us grace steadfastly to resist the allurements of sin, that, the lusts of our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey Your godly leadings in righteousness and true holiness, to Your honor and glory, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*The Lutheran Liturgy*, p. 86)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the fourth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, He was hungry. And the tempter came and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." / But He answered, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" / Then the devil took Him to the holy city and set Him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to Him, "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, lest you strike your foot against a stone.' / Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.' / Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, "All these I will give You, if You will fall down and worship me." / Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.' / Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to Him. ^(ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who chose suffering and the cross over glory and ease, so that sinners could be saved, dear fellow redeemed:

127 years ago, Pastor U. V. Koren preached this: "The age we live in is a difficult time for the church. There is a great apostasy. Many teachers are retreating step by step – they give up one truth after another – so it seems nothing will be left except a powerless Law-doctrine. Each person wants to be saved by his own beliefs, if they ask about salvation at all" (*U. V. Koren's Works*, Vol. 1, Sermons, p. 130). They are words that are just as fitting today. The situation has not changed. In fact the Church has been suffering and stumbling along ever since Eden, when Adam and Eve gave in to the devil's temptation.

God's creation had a good beginning. Everything was peaceful and perfect. But some of the angels decided they did not want to serve the almighty God. Led by the devil, they rebelled against their Creator and were condemned to eternal torment. These fallen angels are called "demons." Their entire scheme and activity is to promote wickedness and unbelief in the world, so that many people are condemned along with them.

We sadly see the great success they have had, starting with Adam and Eve. But they have not succeeded in overrunning and overturning all that is good. They still have not done—and will never accomplish—what they set out to do, which is to defeat their Creator. "[T]he devil has been sinning from the beginning," but the Lord would not let this wickedness go unchecked. God the Father sent His Son to take on human flesh, so that He would "destroy the works of the devil" (1Jn. 3:8).

I

Jesus publicly stepped into the devil's crosshairs when He was baptized in the Jordan River. It was an impressive beginning to His public work. Immediately after His baptism, "the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased'" (Mt. 3:16-17). How could the devil accomplish anything against the beloved Son of God, who was anointed with the Spirit of God?

But what followed is not what we would expect. Jesus did not embark in the power of the Spirit on a victory tour through the world. He did not immediately subdue the forces of wickedness and cause every knee to bow to Him. He did not make a public spectacle of Satan and bind him in unbreakable chains, so he could do no more harm. Instead, "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." The evangelist Mark indicates this was no optional journey, writing that the Spirit "drove him out into the wilderness" (1:12).

For forty days and forty nights, Jesus went without food. The amount of time was not a coincidence. It rained for forty days and forty nights when no believers were left on the earth except Noah and his family (Gen. 7:11-16). Moses was on Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights, during which the LORD engraved His Ten Commandments on two stone tablets. After Moses found the people worshiping a golden calf, he returned to the mountain for another forty days and forty nights to intercede for them. Moses neither ate nor drank while in the LORD's presence on the mountain (Ex. 24:18, 34:28; Deut. 9:9, 18).

Because the Israelites did not trust God to give them the land He had promised, they were forced to wander in the wilderness for forty years. Their punishment was one year for each of the forty days the spies had seen the goodness of the land of Canaan and rejected it (Num. 14:28-35). Much later, Elijah returned to the area where Moses had received the Commandments of God. Before starting his journey there, an angel gave him food and drink that sustained him for the forty days and forty nights of travel (1Kin. 19:5-8).

In each case, the forty days and forty nights reflected a period of disobedience and sin against God. Jesus now fasted in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights in perfect obedience to His Father's will. He came to cover in righteousness what the human race had done in sin. No man could go so long without food under his own power, but Jesus was the God-Man. As God,

He could go as long as He wanted without food. But as Man in His state of humiliation, He became hungry.

The devil saw an opportunity. *“If You are the Son of God,”* he said, *“command these stones to become loaves of bread.”* Why should Jesus deny Himself? If He was hungry, He should eat. It was as though the devil were saying that whatever Jesus was trying to accomplish by fasting in the wilderness, it wasn’t worth it. He could just as well have said that whatever He thought He needed to do on earth in general, that wasn’t worth it either. *“Throw yourself down from the temple”* – then everyone will know who you are. No need to be patient. No need to wait. *“Fall down and worship me”* – no need to stick with the plan. No need to suffer for sinners. *Jesus, they aren’t worth it!*

II

Satan tempted Jesus with a cross-free life, which is exactly how he tempts us. *“Why suffer?”* he says. *“Why deny yourself? Why miss out? If you desire it, do it. If you want it, take it. Steal that money. Take those drugs. Down that bottle. Eat what you want. Look at those pictures. Jump in that bed. Tell some lies. Blame someone else.”* What the devil wants us to do is exactly what the world says we should do. This should come as no surprise. The devil reigns in this kingdom of darkness. He is *“the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience”* (Eph. 2:2).

But if we acted on all our desires and pursued everything our flesh wanted, this would not lead us to greater joy and contentment, but rather to greater pain and suffering. The idea that a life of self-indulgence, immorality, and worldly pleasure is the best course a person can take is a lie. The world swallows this lie, hook, line, and sinker. This is why no one wants to admit sin anymore, or take responsibility for their own actions, or recognize that how they feel should have no bearing on what they do.

Adam and Eve did not want to take responsibility for their sin either, the very first sin. They wanted to pass the blame. They tried to plead ignorance. They tried to hide. But there was no escaping from the holy God. There was no way that they could justify sinning against God. There is no justification for our sins either. The devil can only tempt us to sin; he cannot make us do it. If you and I have sinned, the responsibility and fault is our own.

But God promised to send a Savior, a Substitute, One who would take responsibility for the irresponsible, who would pay the price for the unworthy. Contrary to the devil’s temptation, Jesus did not take the easy way out. The easy way out – and a just way – would have been to punish sinners for their wrongs in the eternal fires of hell. That is exactly what you and I and all sinners have earned and deserved.

But Jesus chose the way of suffering and the cross to save sinners. He endured immense anguish and agony, so that the wrath of God against sin would be satisfied. He was nailed to the cross, so that your sins would no longer be counted against you. By removing sin, He removed any claim the devil had on you. If the devil accuses you and points out your sin, you can point to Jesus. He paid for your sins with His holy, precious blood. He chose to suffer your death and hell, so you would have His life and heaven.

Your salvation is why Jesus was willing to “go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Mt. 16:21), as He told His disciples. Peter did not like the sound of that. He took Jesus aside and told Him to stop thinking and talking that way. Then Jesus said to him, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man” (v. 23).

The way of God is the way of love and sacrifice and self-denial. This is how Jesus calls His followers to live. “If anyone would come after me,” says Jesus, “let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” If we aim for pleasure and fulfillment in the world, we will join the devil in eternal destruction. But if in humble repentance and faith we follow after Jesus, we will enjoy the eternal victory He won for us.

Satan Tempts with a Cross-Free Life. But Jesus would not hear of it, and neither should you. The way of the world’s glory is meaningless and short-lived. The way of the cross is the way of trouble and difficulty in the world, but it is also the way of life and hope. It is to follow after Jesus, to be blessed by His constant presence and care, and finally to receive from Him the crown of everlasting life.

In this forty day season of Lent, remember that you are not alone in the wilderness of this world. As Luther wrote, Jesus is “by our side upon the plain / With His good gifts and Spirit” (ELH 250, v. 4). He is “with us in the fight” (251, v. 4), and He will not let the devil overcome any who trust in Him. Jesus would not give up His mission no matter how the devil tempted Him, and He will not give up on you, for whom He willingly took up His cross, died, and rose again.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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