

The First Sunday in Lent

St. Matthew 4:1-11: "Jesus Chose Suffering for You."

February 20/21, 2021 | 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 out of love for us You were in all ways tempted, as we are. Yet You remained without sin and, as our merciful High Priest, can be moved with compassion for our weaknesses. We pray that You give us grace to steadfastly resist the allurements of sin, that the desires of our flesh are subdued to the Spirit, so we may ever obey Your godly leadings in righteousness and true holiness, to Your honor and glory. Amen. (*Meditations on the Gospels*, p. 424)

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. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, whose every thought, every word, and every action, were focused on your salvation, dear fellow redeemed:

His hair still dripping from His baptism, Jesus came out of the water. At that moment the heavens opened, and the Holy Spirit came down in the form of a dove and rested on Him. Then the voice of the Father rang out of the heavens, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Mat. 3:16-17). It was an impressive beginning, a fitting inauguration for the God incarnate, the only Son of the Father who came to save the world.

What would happen next? Not what we expect. "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." The evangelist Mark writes that the Holy Spirit "drove him out into the wilderness" (1:12). So much for the picture of the Spirit as a gentle dove! Why would

the Spirit do this to the Son? It was the Father's will. He had not sent His Son for glory here on earth, but for suffering.

Suffering was possible for Jesus because He was in His state of humiliation. He was not making full use of His divine powers. That meant He could feel weakness and temptation and pain. In today's account, we see He could experience hunger. He fasted – went without food – for forty days and forty nights, and *"He was hungry."* You have perhaps fasted for a day or two because of an illness. But when you recover, you feel a gnawing hunger. Your stomach is ready to be filled again!

Jesus went without eating for forty days. This is humanly possible and has been done by others, but it is not easy. As His fast extended, Jesus would have increasingly felt dull and weak. This helps us understand how the devil's temptations were real trials for Jesus. The devil used Jesus' hunger to attack His mission and His Person. *"So You are the 'beloved Son' of the Father, are You? And He claims to be 'well pleased' with You, doesn't He? That's interesting because He doesn't seem to care much about You right now. Here You are, all alone, hungry. If You are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."*

There is something reasonable about this. The devil is an expert at making wrong things seem reasonable. If Jesus is God, why shouldn't He make some food for Himself? Why should His suffering have to continue? But the Spirit did not drive Jesus into the wilderness for rest and relaxation. It was to prepare Him for the hard work He came to do, the work of redeeming the world from sin and death. If it was the Father's will that Jesus should be hungry, then He would be hungry. Quoting from the book of Deuteronomy, Jesus said, *"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."*

"Oh, so You want to cite the Scriptures, do You," thought the devil. *"I can do that too! 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.'* Then the Father will prove His love for You! Then You can know this suffering isn't for nothing!" Again Jesus replied with Scripture, *"You shall not put the Lord your God to the test."* God's love for us is clear in His Word. He does not need to prove it on our terms, or bail us out if we do something foolish.

Then the devil got right to the heart of the matter. *"So You've come here to reign, have You? All the kingdoms of the world and their glory are at my fingertips. They can all be Yours! All these I will give You, if You will fall down and worship me. No need to struggle, no need to be hungry, no need to suffer!"* Jesus, even in His weakened state, had heard enough. *"Be gone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.'"* Forty days into a fast, out in the wilderness, terrible anguish and affliction looming in front of Him, and Jesus said: *"I choose suffering."*

Only He could have done this. You and I don't have the will or the strength. It isn't that we always choose the easy path. There are plenty of examples of people choosing the hard road. A soldier exposes himself to enemy fire to save his friend. A wife cares for her ailing husband or a husband for his ailing wife. An employee stands up to an unethical boss. A young man or a young woman says "no" even when they know they will be ridiculed for it.

But none of us would make the choice Jesus did. He chose intense suffering, the fires of hell, and death for the very people who sinned against Him. Many of them were glad to see Him die. Even while He hung on the cross, they mocked Him. St. Paul writes that *“one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Rom. 5:7-8). Paul goes on to say that we were all Jesus’ enemies; we were all against Him by nature (v. 10). And He suffered and died for us.

If we saw a future like that laid out before us, we wouldn’t go another step forward. We would turn the stones into bread. We would throw ourselves down from the temple. We would bow to the devil. We would do what was in our own best interest, and our track record proves it.

Often we have chosen to feed our hunger for the things of this life – more things, nicer things, newer things – all of them things that are temporary and will pass away. We have *“put God to the test”* by throwing ourselves into one sinful situation after another. We knew what we were doing was wrong, but we did it anyway. And we have bowed down to the devil by valuing glory in the world more than grace in the Word, by caring about the future of our own making more than the blessings prepared for us by our heavenly Father. When we should have said, *“Be gone, Satan!”* we said, *“I like what I’m hearing. Stick around a while. Tell me more!”*

It was because of our sin that Jesus fasted for forty days in the wilderness. It was a full forty days of fasting before the forty days of feasting after His resurrection. Forty comes up many times in the Bible. At the time of Noah, rain fell for forty days and forty nights to cleanse the world of its wickedness. Moses went without food and water for forty days and forty nights while he received the holy Law from God. The Israelites wandered for forty years in the wilderness until all those who rebelled against God had died.

Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights because of your hunger for worldly things. He wanted to do for you what you had neither the desire nor the ability to do for yourself. He chose to deny His own physical needs and *“seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness”* (Mat. 6:33), so that you would receive the treasures of heaven that will last forever. He chose to do His Father’s will and endure hardship and pain, so that you would become the Father’s own dear child and an heir of everlasting life. He chose to be a humble servant and to give Himself as a sacrifice, so that you would reign with Him at the right hand of the Father and enjoy eternal glory.

Jesus did not choose the easy way out. He chose the path of suffering in order to save you. Jesus saw hunger, torment, and pain in His future. But He also saw you. He saw you, lost, helpless, hopeless. He saw you covered in your sins, spiritually starving, dying. And He loved you. *“I will give My life for yours,”* He said. *“I will pay for your sins. I will take your punishment. I will suffer your hell. I will die your death.”*

And nothing could steer Him from this path. Nothing that the devil tried succeeded. No temptation overcame Him. In every respect He was tempted as we are, but He did not sin (Heb. 4:15). To fail was to lose you and all sinners. So Jesus would not fail. He would not lose you.

He still fights for you, even now. He fights for you by coming to you in His Word and Sacraments. He comes to chase away the devil when you have gotten comfortable having him around. He comes to strengthen you for the temptations and trials ahead which would be too much for you. And He comes to comfort you for the hardships you have experienced and the pain you have endured as a Christian living in a fallen world.

Jesus will not forsake you. He suffered and died for you, and now He lives for you. He is with you in the wilderness as you wander through this world. He feeds you with His own body and blood. He bears you up in His arms of providence and power. And He lifts your eyes to the joys to come, the joys of heaven where sorrow and suffering will be no more.

Jesus remained faithful to His mission. He followed His Father's will. The devil did not win. "[F]or the joy that was set before him [he] endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb. 12:2). He gladly fasted, endured affliction, and died in order to redeem you. **Jesus Chose Suffering for You**, to save you.

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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