

First Sunday in Lent: Matthew 4:1–11

William Cwirla

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In Nomine Iesu

Sin begins almost imperceptibly. The little lie. The half-truth. It's that little tiny error when you release the bow and let the arrow fly that causes you to miss the mark. Perhaps that's why the word for sin, "hamartia," means literally missing the mark. The miss looks huge at the end when the arrow flies way off target. But the error in the beginning was almost imperceptible. You golfers know this. A slight twitch. A breath at the wrong moment. Just a tiny hair off on the angle of the club can be the difference between birdy and bogey. It's that little wayward glance that leads to adultery. That little petty theft that leads to grand larceny. In the Greek tragedies, "hamartia," sin, is that tiny little misstep that sets into motion a chain of events that ends in tragedy. Like the innocent little snowball that triggers the avalanche that buries the town.

"The devil's in the details" we say. That's true. The devil doesn't full on tempt us to sin in the big stuff. He tempts us in the little things, imperceptibly small things that don't cross the line so much as scuff the borders just a little bit.

That's how he snagged Eve on the hook of his lie. He didn't come out and say, "Hey, God is wrong" or "God doesn't exist" or "Never mind what God said." He came with this little scintilla of doubt and a twisted question. "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" Put that way, it makes no sense. If they couldn't eat of any tree in the garden, they would have had nothing to eat. The correct and only answer to this question is, "No. Go away." But that's not what happened. Eve rushed in to defend God and His Word. "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, you silly serpent, but God did say you shall not eat of the fruit of the tree in the middle of garden (actually one of the two trees in the middle), neither shall you touch it, lest you die."

Now let's be clear. God said this: "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you

shall surely die.” All the trees are yours, My gift to you. One tree is not for you to eat. Don’t mess with good and evil. That’s my business. Death and Life are where the action is. I give you life from the Tree of Life, so don’t eat the Tree of knowing good and evil. That will be death to you.

Eve’s misstep was adding a little something to God’s Word. It seems innocent. Pious even. Don’t eat, don’t even touch. And from that little pebble of doubt that God’s Word was sufficient as is and didn’t need any help from us, the avalanche of sin that buried our humanity began.

“You won’t die,” the devil says, sticking his foot in the open door of temptation. He’s got her. Dialoging with the devil is dangerous business. Snakes have a way of finding the tiniest openings and slithering through them. “God knows that when you eat the tree of knowing good and evil you’re going to see things the way God sees things and He doesn’t want you to see things that way. He wants you to be His dependent, subservient little child. Not His equal.”

And then begins the rationalization. We can rationalize almost every sinful action we take. She saw the tree was good, tasty, delicious. It was beautiful, pleasing to the eye. It made you wise. How can anything so good, so beautiful, so right be so wrong? Except that God said so. And so she bit, and Adam bit, and humanity bit, and Sin and Death became our lot in life because of one little, off the mark, scintilla of doubt that God’s Word was good enough.

I know the story seems a bit silly. Talking snakes, forbidden fruit, people cavorting naked in a garden. But it’s terribly and terrifying profound. This is how it is with us. This is why it is with us. This is how we fall into the worst sorts of sins. It begins with that one little miss. Hamartia.

Jesus came to put Sin to death in the flesh. He came as the second Adam, humanity’s new Head, Adam 2.0. Adam 1.0 brought Sin, Death, and condemnation under the Law into the world. Adam 2.0, Jesus, brings righteousness, life, and justification “Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness, one perfect innocent death on the cross by the Son of God in the flesh, leads to justification and life for all men. As many as were made sinners by Adam 1.0’s disobedience, so many are made saints by the obedience of Adam 2.0.

Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, yet He did not sin. Immediate after His baptism, He was led by the Spirit who had descended upon Him into the wilderness for forty days and forty

night. Jesus does an “Israel.” Just as Israel went from the baptismal Sea to the Sinai wilderness, so Jesus goes from water to wilderness as God’s Israel. He does the full “forty,” His “Lenten fast.” He is hungry and vulnerable. The devil sees an opportunity.

“If you are the Son of God,” he hisses, “command these stone to be loaves of bread.” Jesus is the creative Word who created all things and in whom all things, from stones to bread, hold together. Surely He has the power. But He will not use His power to fill His hunger. His bread is every Word the proceeds from the mouth of God.

Where we are tempted by hunger, by appetite, by bread and by the lack of it, Jesus conquers. He refuses the secret, self-serving miracle. Miracles were signs for faith, not some power trip over the laws of creation. He refuses to turn one thing into another. God creates; He doesn’t destroy. To turn stone into bread would be destructive of the stones, which are His creatures too. When He wanted to feed thousands in the wilderness, He multiplied bread that was there. But He won’t turn stones into bread and more that He turns bread into His body. Bread remains bread, but in His Supper it becomes something more. The Lord’s way is always creative not destruction. It is the way of the devil to destroy God’s creation.

It would have been a tiny thing, a little step off the path to Calvary for Jesus to fill His empty belly with bread of His own making. But that wouldn’t be the way of the Son of God. He came to hunger so that in Him we might be filled. He blessed those who were hungry and thirsty and promised them contentment in the kingdom. Where we are filled with anxiety and will do most anything for bread if we are hungry enough, Jesus simply trusts that His Father knows what He needs without taking up stones.

The devil took Him to Jerusalem, the holy city, and set Him on the pinnacle of the temple. “If you are Son of God, jump. Throw yourself down. The angels will catch you. God promised no harm would come to you. You won’t even stub your toe. Jump.”

It’s the temptation to test God and His Word. Prove it true. Find the clincher, the evidence. Test it. See if it works. How many people have fallen from faith because they prayed and got nothing but silence in return?

The devil is a clever tempter, using the text as his pretext. The devil knows his Bible. Better than you do. Be careful. He’s a proof texter. He loves to find that special passage, just for you. He also knows what not to quote. The very next verse of Psalm 91 says, “You will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and serpent you will trample underfoot.” “He will strike

your head, and you will strike His heel.” The old serpent knows full well what Jesus is up to. He’s God’s appointed head-crusher, whose crossed-bruised heel will crush the head of the old snake once and for all.

Jesus came to be lifted up, not on the pinnacle of the temple, but on the cross outside of Jerusalem. No angels came to His rescue. No one in heaven or earth lifted so much as a finger to save Him. But His death is His victory and our life and salvation. Not even Death could hold Him, but Death is swallowed up in His life. No jump from the pinnacle of the temple would do. It took a death on a cross to crush the serpent’s head.

Where we are tempted to test God and His Word, Jesus resisted. He would not put the Lord to the test.

A third time, the devil took Him to a high mountain and there showed Him the kingdoms of this world and all their glory. “All of it can be yours, if you fall down and worship me.” Worship for glory and power. A sweet swap, if ever there was one. But Jesus came to execute a different sort of swap – our Sin for His righteousness. He has all power and glory. He holds all authority in heaven and on earth. But those are His not so He can grab them, but so He can die to save this world. The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ not by bargaining with the prince of this world, much less worshipping him, but by taking humanity’s Sin into Death.

For a third time Jesus resists. And like the other times, He uses nothing but the Word: You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve.

Three temptations, and all three resisted with nothing more than the Word. The power against the darkness, the demons, the old evil Foe, against Sin, Death, and hell is not in you or in your ability to resist. The power is in the Word. Nothing but the Word. Nothing more than the Word. “One little word can fell Him.” One little Word did fell Him on a dark good Friday. The solitary misstep, the little “harmartia” that plunged humanity into Sin and the cosmos into Death was undone by one small death that embraced all humanity – every sin atoned, every sinner redeemed. Adam’s sin is answered by Jesus’ righteousness. And it’s in the of the one death and resurrection, that the devil is undone.

You will be tempted. You will have your wilderness, your Lent, your place where you are hungry and vulnerable and alone. The devil knows your weakness. But you do not go this

journey alone. The Son of God goes with you and has gone before you. He has conquered and in Him you conquer too.

8 Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. 9 Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your fellow Christians throughout the world. 10 And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. 11 To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 5:8-11)

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "1 Lent 2017 – Matthew 4:1-11", posted 2017-04-20 (<https://htlcms.org/2017/04/1-lent-2017-matthew-41-11/>).