

First Sunday in Lent: Matthew 4:1–11

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Jesus was tempted in every way we are and did not sin. The devil had met his match. On earth was not his equal. We are putty in the devil's hands. God had to make enmity because we were friends and allies. God had to become man to set humanity against the devil. The one little Word that could fell him became Flesh to be tempted for us all.

Immediately after His Baptism in Jordan, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. From the water to the wilderness, He walks the way of Israel as Israel reduced to One. He is alone, isolated for forty days and forty nights, hungry from fasting. He is the perfect target for the devil. The devil, like a predator, looks for the lone, isolated sheep. He waits for Eve to be alone and vulnerable. He seeks to isolate the baptized believer at home, by himself or herself, away from other Christians, away from the church, away from the preached and heard Word and the Sacrament. He wants to get you curved inward into yourself, which is your inborn tendency.

This is why Luther did not trust solitude as a spiritual solution. His advice was always to seek the company of robust Christians, and I don't think it was just that Luther was apparently an extrovert. He sensed that the devil seeks the solitary believer. Luther experienced that in his own life. The deepest doubts and anxieties came at night when he was alone in his cell or study with thoughts racing through his head. That's why he told Philipp Melanchthon who was beset by depression and doubt to seek out some good friends and tell jokes and not be alone so much.

We sometimes forget that the devil is uniquely uncreative. He has no power to create anything. He is himself a creature of God, a fallen spirit. He can't create anything. He can only use what God has created and try to turn them against God. He uses a snake, one of God's creatures, a "creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth," as his "incarnation." He uses a tree and its fruit that God created to tempt Eve and cause Adam's fall. That's why there's no thing that is evil in itself. Evil is good used against God, and the devil is the master of this subtle art.

He takes what is good – a snake, a tree, its fruit, a stone, a piece of bread, a glass of wine – and uses it against God.

He can even use hymnals, prayer books, Bibles, and now the internet to his advantage. Clearly these are good things, or can be used for good. Who would argue with everyone having their own Bible? But when those things drive a wedge between you and the church, between you and hearing rather than reading the Word, between you and the altar, then watch out. The Bible is as much of a tool in the hands of the devil as it is in the hands of God.

He comes to Jesus when He is alone and hungry. “If you are the Son of God,” he says to Jesus. That’s the parallel to what he first said to Eve. “Did God really say...?” “If you are the Son of God. You are the Son of God, aren’t you Jesus? Did the Father really say that in your Baptism? ‘This is my beloved Son?’ Or perhaps you were hearing things, or maybe you misheard. Did God really say that?”

That’s the devil’s first trick, to drive a wedge between you and the Word. Did God really say you are a child of God? When did He say that to you? In your Baptism? Really? And you trust that, do you? How do you know that Baptism is something God does and not something you do? The Word says so. Really? Did God really say that?

“Did God really say you must not eat of any tree in the garden?” And Eve immediately bit on the bait and answered, “No! We may eat of any of the trees in the garden except this one over there in the middle, the one about knowing good and evil. We’re not supposed to eat from that one or even touch it or we’ll die.”

She won’t let the Word speak for itself. She has to add something to it. Ramp it up a bit with a clincher. “Don’t eat and don’t even touch it.” You’ll notice that she doesn’t simply ignore God’s Word or say, “Well, we don’t know what He really said or what He really meant or whether that applies to us today or not.” No. She does something far more subtle. She adds her word in defense of God’s Word. She adds her rules to God’s law. “Don’t even touch it!” so that now it’s the fruit that is in question and not the use of it. That’s the beginning of all pietism and enthusiasm and dogmatism: defending God’s Word by adding a few of our own because God’s Word can’t stand on its own. It needs our help. That’s all the opening the devil needs. As you know, if the snake can get its head in the door, the whole body will follow.

He points to the wilderness stones all around Jesus, stones that God had made by the Word. Stones that were good in all their inert “stoniness.” And the devil uses the gift of those stones

to tempt the Son. “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread.” “You have the power, don’t you Jesus? You made these stones. If you can do that, you can certainly change them into bread to fill your empty stomach. Who would know that you cheated on your fast? There’s no one here to see you.”

It’s the temptation of the appetites, our most basic temptation. It’s not surprising that the devil used food to tempt Eve, a fruit that was delicious, beautiful, and useful. How can it be wrong when it tastes so good, looks so beautiful, is so useful? We rationalize and justify so many things this way – our gluttonous eating, our drunkenness, our adulteries, our self-indulgences. We follow our hearts over the Word with the rationale that it can’t be wrong if it feels so right.

And again, the appetites are a good thing. God made them. We are sensual creatures. God gave us our senses of taste, smell, touch, hearing, sight. He makes things beautiful and tasty and pleasurable. It’s all good from God, but in the hands of the devil it becomes a tool for temptation. We give in almost without a thought. We’ll do almost anything for a piece of bread if we’re hungry enough, and we’ll justify any means to the end.

For Jesus to turn those stones to bread would have been a betrayal of who He was and why He came. He came to serve not to be served. He came to humble himself to death not be exalted in life. He came to feed the five thousand in the wilderness by multiplying bread not to feed himself by destroying stones. His food was to do His Father’s will and die for the Sin of the world. “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”

A second time the devil tempts Jesus. This time he takes Him to the highest point in the city, the pinnacle of the temple, and he quotes Scripture to Jesus. “He will give His angels charge of you, on their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.” That’s psalm 91. It’s written about Christ. It’s also written against the devil. The next verse reads, “You will tread upon the lion and the cobra, you will trample the great lion and the serpent.” But never mind that. The devil is a great prooftexter. He loves Bible verses in isolation.

So you are the Son of God, aren’t you, Jesus? The Bible says the angels will catch you and you won’t even stub your little toe. Jump! You trust God’s Word, don’t you, Jesus? You are the Son of God, aren’t you? So jump and let the angels catch you on the way down.

The temptation is to test the Word, to prove it, to run the experiment to see if it works. But that's not the way of faith. You can't prove that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth by His Word. You can't prove that you are a child of God in Baptism. You can't prove that you are justified by the blood of Christ shed on the cross. You must take God at His Word. You can't see it or smell it or taste it. If you could, you wouldn't have to believe it. "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." (Notice that: the Lord your God. He's God's devil!)

We run headlong to the notion that faith can be proven and there are plenty of so-called believers who have gone splat jumping off of religious pinnacles trusting the angels will catch them. We believe that there are angels protecting us, but we still look both ways before crossing the street. We believe that God has the power to heal, but we still go to the doctor when we're sick. We believe that the prayers of a righteous person avail much, but we still work as though everything depended upon us. But isn't this unbelief? Shouldn't we just "let go and let God"? "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." It's in the testing that faith is destroyed.

A third time the devil comes to Jesus. He takes Him to a very high mountain and shows him all the kingdom of this world and their glory. The big prize. The lotto payoff. This is what men aspire to: power, riches, glory. "All these things I will give you, if you fall down and worship me." "It's all yours, Jesus. All the kingdoms of this world in all their glory. Never mind that messy business of a cross. You can have it all now. I'll surrender them to you. Worship me."

It's the temptation of idolatry. All sin is idolatry. Greed is idolatry, said St. Paul. The love of money is the root of all manner of evil. Wealth, power, glory. As bread is to the empty stomach, wealth, power, and glory are to the empty soul. They promise everything – long life, happiness, peace, if only I had.... And like bread on an empty stomach, we're willing to sacrifice most anything to have power, wealth, glory. Not only our lives but the lives of everyone around us. Even the unborn are sacrificed for wealth, power, contentment, convenience.

We don't see it as idolatry and false worship. We don't see it quite so obviously as bowing down before the devil and worshipping him. He's far too clever to let us see that. What we see is success, celebrity, recognition, achievement, making a name, leaving a legacy, being admired, having control, being in charge. Being a winner. Number one. We don't see it as "worship," unless we see how much the pursuit of these things cuts into our worship. We say

“God is number one in my life,” but do the math. Ninety minutes of worship once a week is less than 1% of your week. Add 30 minutes of prayer a day and you’ll boost that to just under 3%.

“You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.”

Jesus speaks the Law to the devil. It’s all he deserves to hear. He came to do this Law, to obey the Law and fulfill it by His life and death. Jesus worshipped God in our human flesh and served only His Father. He did not put His Father to the test, but trusted Him even when He was forsaken by the Father in silence. He lived by every Word that proceeded from the mouth of His Father. Jesus did all this in our human flesh, and in our flesh he conquered the devil on his turf. “One little word can fell him.”

You conquer too. Not in your own strength; you have no such strength. You aren’t equal to the devil’s temptation. Your strength is Christ. In Him you conquer. “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith.” Faith resists the devil because Jesus has conquered the devil. We resist in the strength of Christ’s might, standing firm in Christ by faith.

In this life, you will be tempted. God tempts no one, but you will be tempted by the devil along with the world and your own sinful flesh. You will be tempted to disbelief, despair, not to mention great shame and vice. You will be tempted to satisfy your own cravings and desires at all and any cost. You will be tempted to test God’s Word, to try and prove it to be true. You will be tempted to barter your worship for power, wealth, riches, fame, glory. You will be tempted not to be the child of God that you are.

Remember who you are. You are baptized. You’re a child of God in the Son of God. Your life is in Christ not in yourself. Hidden in Christ, you’re no match for the devil. One little Word can fell him.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "Matthew 4:1-11 / 9 March 2014 (Lent 1A)", posted 2014-03-09 (<https://htlcms.org/2014/03/mt-41-11-9-march-2014-lent-1a/>).