

The First Sunday in Lent
February 18, 2018
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM

Luke 4:1-13 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, **2** where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

3 The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."

4 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone.'"

5 The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. **6** And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. **7** If you worship me, it will all be yours."

8 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

9 The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here. **10** For it is written:

"He will command his angels concerning you

to guard you carefully;

11 they will lift you up in their hands,

so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."

12 Jesus answered, "It is said: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

13 When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

"Hold Onto His Medal"

Getting captivated by the Winter Olympics is somewhat unexpected. These are sports you didn't even realize existed a week and a half ago. The ones you have heard of, you have never tried. I mean, if you are like me, just staying upright while on skis or skates is enough of an accomplishment in itself without hurling yourself down a mountain at death-defying speeds or catapulting yourself into the air and spinning around four times before anyone can utter one-Mississippi. But there you are, gripped by these exotic, frozen events. The competitors pull you in. Their personal stories swell your heart. And so, when they finished a snowboarding run or the music stops on their performance, when they beam with delight and pump a triumphant fist in the air, you can't help but feel your own heart swell with pride. Of course, the opposite is true too. When they fail, you feel the pain. When they fall and wipe out and take themselves out of medal contention, your heart breaks, crushed with disappointment right along with them.

In the pages of Scripture today we are witnessing another kind of competition. Jesus goes away from the adoring crowds and fans. Out in the desolate desert he only has the sun beating down on his head. Isolated in the emptiness, he is greeted by a formidable adversary. And yet, as Jesus faces the temptations from the devil, you are more than just an observer. The struggle of Jesus against sin is real. But it is also your struggle. His performance is medal worthy. But he does it for you. Jesus battles against the devil and secures the victory. But it is your victory. You get the prize. You get to celebrate. And so, in the spirit of this competitive environment, Jesus wants you to hold onto his medal.

1. Reality of Your Temptations

The first verses of Luke chapter four set the scene for us: **“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.”** (Luke 4:1,20) Jesus goes toe to toe with his mortal enemy, the devil. He is under a constant barrage of attacks. And as we sift through these verses, we can learn some important truths about temptations.

Key truth #1: The Devil is real. The name “devil” literally means “slanderer.” Another name for him, Satan, means accuser or adversary. A recent survey by YouGov has found that 57% of all Americans believe in the existence of the devil.¹ It’s reassuring that a majority of people in our skeptical society agree with this one Bible teaching. But that still leaves a huge number of people who think the devil is nothing more than a fairy tale or some invented myth meant to scare Sunday School children into behaving. As we see from these verses, if the devil convinces us he doesn’t even exist, he’s already got the upper hand when he’s working to trip up unsuspecting victims. He can easily take us down and take us out of competition.

Key truth #2: The devil will prey on your weaknesses. The devil knew Jesus was hungry. He knew Jesus had been out in the wilderness by himself for 40 days. The devil was aware and used it to his advantage. He customized his temptations of Jesus to match those circumstances. You need bread, Jesus. And you have the power to snap your fingers and make yourself a meal. Pretty simple. You are going to eventually get power and glory. Why not take a quicker route to get there? Just bow down and worship me and you can skip all the messy parts in between.

Even for people who are aware of the existence of the devil, it doesn’t mean we are always on our guard against his worst attacks. We read the news and shake our heads at the terrible things people do and tell ourselves we could never do that. We watch in horror as the development from the latest tragedy unfolds and tell ourselves we are so different than that perpetrator, his background, his childhood, the way he handled his mental health issues. We take stock of how much stronger, how much more healthy we are and convince ourselves we would never fall into the same sin. We barricade the front door, but leave the back door of other sins completely wide open.

Key truth #3: The devil employs deceit, often twisting good into bad. There is nothing wrong with bread. No one would miss a few stones. Nothing wrong or sinful with performing a miraculous act like that. Worship is good. God wants us to bow down and worship. And God invites us to trust in him. He promises to take care of us. The devil even uses Scripture. He quotes God’s word and finds the right promises to apply to this particular section. Just throw yourself down from the temple. God will take care of you.

¹ Carter, Joe. “Survey: Majority of Americans Believe in the Existence of Satan and Demon Possession.” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/survey-majority-of-americans-believe-in-the-existence-of-satan-and-demon-poss/> Accessed 16 February 2018.

And that makes it particularly tricky. We know Scripture, but we don't have the entire Bible memorized. We know God's promises. And we can tell when something doesn't sound quite right. But can we really be expected to perform perfectly even time in every situation? Isn't it good enough that we try hard most of the time and are successful against temptation more often than we fail?

2. Jesus Faced them All

Transition: You and I aren't Olympic athletes. We will probably never know what it is like to be an elite, world-class competitor in any field. Maybe you watched the Olympics for the first time as a child or the Super Bowl or the World Series and dreamed of being in that spotlight. But then the first time you were picked last for kickball on the playground, you came back to reality. Those athletes are just in a different class than the rest of us. We would be lucky just to strap on a pair of skis and not hurt ourselves. To lace up a pair of skates and stay vertical on the ice for an entire minute.

We don't want to make the same mistake when we see Jesus going through these temptations from the devil. In some very important ways, Jesus is completely different than we are. But in the ways that really matter, that mean he actually suffered, he actually faced the full brunt of the devil's power; he was a completely real human being.

So when Jesus grew up in the home of Mary and Joseph, he went through every phase in life that we do. When he was in middle school, he would have felt the same tug to question every statement made by every authority figure. He went through the rebellious years as a teenager and passed through puberty. Our second Bible reading for today says it this way: **"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are."** (Hebrews 4:15) So that means Jesus felt the gnawing pit in his stomach when it was empty. He faced exhaustion out in the wilderness, fatigue from fasting. He was in a weakened condition when the devil found him. He was very susceptible to every one of the devil's attacks. Jesus faced them all in his full humanity.

Each temptation took its toll on Jesus in a very powerful way. Stones to bread. Worship in exchange for power and authority. Jumping from the top of the temple. Jesus could have run through the same inner dialogue that Adam and Eve allowed inside their heads. It's just food. It's not that big of a deal. Maybe it would have been easy to take the devil's bait and just prove who he really was, what power he really possessed. Yet collectively they were an easy way out, the chicken exit on the scary roller coaster ride, the easy button for a tough job.

Something much more sinister was going on as the devil kept up his constant attacks, poking around for weaknesses and looking to exploit some vulnerability. Doing any one of those things the devil was prodding would not have automatically been evil. But the devil had one goal in mind. He was tempting Jesus to bypass the cross to reach for glory right now. Right now you can fill your belly. It doesn't matter how you do it. Right now you can get those kingdoms. Who cares what you have to sacrifice to get them? Right now you can have God's rescue, the assurance that he will be there when you need him. Does it really

matter if it is completely self-serving and selfish? Behind every one of those temptations was the sinister plot to rob you of the prize Jesus was dedicating his life to earn.

Transition: Olympic athletes prepare for years. Actually, their entire lives are built up to this crucial moment. Years go into preparing for a particular event. Months are dedicated to learning a routine or new technique. Intense coaching sessions drill mental toughness to stand up against other world class athletes and the scrutiny that comes with a word stage. But all of that can come unraveled in one moment. If they lose focus for a split second, one bobble, one extra bend, one little fall can bring the whole thing crashing down.

And this is what happens when the devil gets inside the heads of God's people. If you let his words sink in just a little too long. If you consider what he is offering long enough to actually rationalize what you might be willing to give up. If you analyze the costs of staying true to the Lord and how much easier it would be to take the devil's offer. And after you've made that one mental error, after you've had that one little bobble in your spiritual performance, how can you keep going? How can you get back up and finish a race you know won't be perfect? How can you tough it out and keep trying when you know your efforts won't get you gold? After all, you're human. Nobody is perfect.

3. Jesus Battles for You

Jesus went into the desert for a reason. It wasn't an accident. It wasn't a mistake that put him there. Jesus **"was led by the Spirit into the wilderness"** (Luke 4:1) Jesus didn't have to do any of this. At least for himself. He was flawless when he left his throne in heaven. He could have stayed at home in comfort without exposing himself to these very real attacks at his weakest moments. But Jesus went through this all for you. He put himself at risk for people who fall and fall frequently.

Satan had more than just a few mistakes in his scope. He was a careful sniper taking aim at the entire reason why Jesus came down to this earth. Jesus faces the challenge from his most fearsome enemy head on. He directly takes on the worst of the devil's schemes. Jesus refused to let the devil get inside his head. Jesus stands his ground and won't take the shortcut. Jesus may have been human just like us. Jesus may have faced all the same weaknesses we do. But there is one important difference: **"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin."** (Hebrews 4:15) Jesus is obedient in all his ways in every day.

Jesus takes the tough way, going to the cross. Jesus knows his Father will provide for him every step of the way without providing bread from rocks. Jesus knows all kingdoms and power and glory will be his. But first he has to go through suffering and death. Once he accomplishes his perfect sacrifice for the world's failures to stand up to temptation, then he will take his rightful place on the throne. Jesus will get the Father's protection, but first he must face the wrath of God. On the cross he must feel the full brunt of the world's sin, the punishment deserved by every sinner. Then the Father will send his angels after he has been lifted from the grave.

Now Jesus' victory is yours. His struggle was for you. His defeat over the devil gives you victory. The reward he earned he shares with you.

You can give the Olympics your full attention and marvel at the amazing accomplishments of these gifted athletes because they come around only every four years. Lent comes around every year. And some people use Lent as an opportunity to give something up for a while. And that can be beneficial if by giving up chocolate, you grow in your appreciation of everything Jesus gave up for you. If sacrificing TV or diet Pepsi helps you maintain a constant focus on Jesus, it can be a beneficial habit. But Lent is ultimately more about Jesus than about me. Jesus was constantly aware of his dangers. Jesus developed a keen detection against temptation. Jesus grew in his knowledge of Scripture to combat those attacks.

So whatever habits you develop for Lent, let them bring you closer to Jesus. When you are weak, turn to Jesus for strength. When the devil starts to get inside your head, go to Scripture for answers. When you fall victim to temptation, run to Jesus for forgiveness. When you feel defeated, beaten and demoralized, hold onto Jesus for your victory. Hold onto the prize he has already won for you by his perfect obedience. For these 40 days focus on Jesus: **"And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus."** (Hebrews 12:1,2) Amen.