

The First Sunday in Lent

March 1, 2020

Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Matthew 4:1-11 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. **2** After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. **3** The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."
4 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"
5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple.
6 "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."
7 Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"
8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. **9** "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."
10 Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"
11 Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

"For Us Fights the Valiant One"

There is so much spectacle surrounding a good fight. You have the weigh in. You have the war of words. Probably some battles on social media. But hopefully it is all just a teaser, just an appetizer to the main course. Whether it is MMA or WWE or old fashioned boxing, the main event is still the main event.

It would ruin a good fight if you knew how it would end before it began. But if you were one of the fighters, then it would be a different matter. If you knew you would win before the fight even started, it would give you confidence in the conflict. When you are tempted to give in or run away, it would give you the strength to stay and fight. And that's what we get when we turn to Matthew chapter 4. Jesus is the one in the fight with the devil. But he wins the victory for you. He wins the victory to give you confidence in all your conflicts with evil forces. In all your battles against the devil, you already know how it all ends. For us fights the valiant one.

First of all, realize we face a fearsome foe. The biggest victory the devil has won in so much of our world is to convince us he is not real. Our world treats evil beings like the devil with skepticism. More often derision. People who still believe in a personal agent of evil are treated as childish and naive. A bad guy running around with horns and a pitchfork is something along the lines of the Easter Bunny that intelligent and enlightened people leave behind when they start to deal with the real world. The world of facts and scientifically-proven phenomena.

According to a recent (2016) Gallup poll, 61% of Americans said they believe in the devil. According to another poll four out of ten Christians (40%) strongly agreed that Satan “is not a living being but is a symbol of evil.” If we for a moment go along with that idea that the devil isn’t real, there are no personal beings behind the evil we see in the world, then we just need to figure things out. If no bad guy is behind those problems, then it is up to us to get along with all forces and all influences in the universe. But we can just analyze two children on a playground. Noah took the basketball from Jayden. So Jayden pushes him or yells a dirty word. Sienna finds new friends to sit next to at the school assembly. So Brianna starts to make up stories about her so her new friends won’t think she’s so special. We face personal conflicts. And we don’t want to scapegoat the devil for our bad behavior when we face temptations. But it is silly to think we do a perfect job of getting along with everyone. Always willing to compromise. Always keeping things in balance in the universe. The results of facing temptations on our own.

The first step in fighting our battles is to recognize the presence of evil. Acknowledge the devil is real. The devil is a real spiritual being. He really creates havoc in our lives. It’s just as foolish to pretend he isn’t real as it is to blame him for all our troubles.

Martin Luther offered encouragement to those dealing with Melancholy. He told them to ignore the assaults of the devil. Since the devil was the one behind the troubling thoughts, they should just tune him out. If their struggles persisted, they should rebuke and mock and even make fun of the devil. He had been defeated. He was no match for Jesus. If those depressive feelings stuck around, they should trust in the hidden glory of the cross. What looked like the greatest tragedy, the worst event in history, when the devil was laughing at the sentence and execution of Jesus, that’s when Jesus actually won the victory over the devil. On the cross.

An experienced distance runner was telling other runners how to handle what happens when you take your workouts off the track. When you are out on the road, you will encounter traffic and pedestrians and pets. If you encounter a dog, the best bet is to just ignore it. If it keeps barking and following, you simply turn around and try to look tough. Maybe even shout, ‘Go home!’ Usually works with those Labradoodles and Chihuahuas. Most of the times with the Rottweilers. You can’t let them know you are scared of them, even if you are. You have to try to scare them off.

It’s so easy to look at this episode from the life of Jesus so we see him as a model for our own lives. And certainly that is an appropriate emphasis when we see anything Jesus did during his life and ministry. Associating with sinners and religious elites alike. Showing kindness to the oppress and compassion to those afflicted with disabilities. Confronting hypocrisy and ignorance. Faithfully obeying the Father’s will and suffering personally because of that focus on God’s will. But there is something bigger we miss out on when we only look at Jesus as an example. Even if we primarily look to Jesus for guidance on HOW to live our own lives.

Why was Jesus out there in the wilderness anyway? The way this whole episode is introduced also tells us why: **“Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”** (Matthew 4:1) It wasn’t an accident that Jesus was out there. (Wilderness is more like taking a wrong turn at Red Mesa and ending up without cell service or any gas station in view. You are out there on your own. You have to fend for yourself.) He didn’t get there by taking a wrong turn. The Spirit led Jesus out into the wilderness so he could be tempted. This was intentional.

We need to see Jesus as the one who fights for us. You have a champion.

Let’s take a look at each temptation individually. First, the Tempter comes to Jesus telling him to turn stones to bread. Since Jesus was hungry and since he had the power to bring creation into existence and transform it for his purposes, this wasn’t a big stretch. But would Jesus use that power for himself. Would you tap into that almighty power at his disposal selfishly. It’s easy to congratulate ourselves when we don’t fall into big, obvious sins. I haven’t had an affair. I haven’t indulged in sexual sins with someone I’m not married to like those celebrities. But would you if had the opportunity? What if you were a millionaire athlete or one of People Magazine’s sexiest? Would you if it just meant getting attention by what you wear? Would you say no to the images right at your fingertips?

When Jesus was tempted by the devil to throw himself down from the top of the temple, it was also a trick. As the Son of God, surely Jesus had God’s power at his disposal to protect him. But would he trust the promise? You know what this is like. Your friend’s husband loses his job. You are sympathetic, but promise them to trust God to provide. Your cousin gets diagnosed with cancer. You share scriptural encouragement that God will see them through this trial. Then it hits you. Closer to home. And you obsess. Your mind races. You can’t stop dwelling on the challenges to your faith.

Finally, Jesus is tempted to bow down and worship the devil. Along with it comes the lure of an easier path to the end goal. Bob Dylan famously sang “You Gotta Serve Somebody.” And as he points out in the song, you may be a businessman or doctor, a construction worker or city councilor, but you will serve somebody. The things we think we own, what we think we control in life, can actually start to control us. Own us. Children or family. Work or wealth. Health or fitness. You may never bow down and pledge your allegiance to them. But if they turn you even one degree away from wholehearted worship and away from one hundred percent allegiance to God, it can be a tiny idol.

When we look at each of these temptations and how we fare against them, it is a reality check. You and I have a less than perfect record against our spiritual enemies. That makes us less than champions. Even one defeat is enough to disqualify you from God’s prize. When we look to Jesus as purely an example, it just shows that I’m focusing way too much on myself in my life. There is no way I can measure up to his performance.

But that’s not the point. Jesus isn’t just your example. Jesus doesn’t just show up in the wilderness to be your moral life coach. Jesus is the valiant one who fights for us.

When Jesus is tempted, he is battling for you. Jesus is responding and refuting for you. Jesus is overcoming and winning the victory for you. When Jesus is tempted to turn stones to bread, Jesus defeats the devil to live perfectly and completely by the FATHER's word and will. He lives perfectly for you. When Jesus is tempted to toss himself down from the temple, Jesus defeats the devil by perfectly trusting his Father. He will not put God to the test. He passes the test for you. When Jesus is tempted to bow down and serve the somebody of the devil, Jesus defeats the devil by never turning aside from perfect worship to God. The entire life and ministry of Jesus is a perfect act of worship and service to God. Jesus doesn't misunderstand or abuse God's power. Jesus uses it all in faithful obedience to God in service to God's people. For you. His perfect life and faithful ministry are for you.

So we see the devil and his temptations are very real. We see what happens when we attempt to defeat those temptations on our own or even with Jesus as our example. We see ultimate vindication comes through the victory of Jesus. For us fights the valiant one. You have a champion.

Unless you have completely managed to block out any news reporting, you have heard a lot about the upcoming election. Candidates all promise to represent the interests of the voters. Voters want a candidate who will fight for them. But we are still skeptical that they will actually represent us. That once elected they will let that power go to their heads. Or they will work for the powerful interests of the people with money who got them elected. Jesus doesn't make you promises about what he will do for you if you put an X next to his name or caucus for him. Jesus has already won the victory for you. Jesus is already at work in your life right now.

A friend of mine who is a pilot told me that the most difficult part of flying the plane is the taking off and the landing. Makes sense. So you actually are working harder if you make multiple trips throughout the day when you go you fly from Durango to Denver or Albuquerque to Phoenix than if you make one flight from Chicago to London. Matthew's Gospel bookends the ministry of Jesus with two big temptation accounts. This account in the wilderness is paralleled by the temptation Jesus faces in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46). Jesus isn't coasting the rest of his life. He isn't on autopilot throughout his remaining ministry. But by his victories over all the temptations fo the devil, Jesus gives you victory.

You can go back to your beginning in your relationship with Jesus. You are baptized. You are a child of God. You can ignore the devil's lies and deceptions, whatever he dredges up about your past, whatever name he calls you. You are an adopted son or daughter. And you know the landing God has in store for you. So you can confront and rebuke and even mock the devil. You have the victory of your champion. And so in every scary episode of your life, you don't need to back down or run away. Through the cross of Jesus, you know you have victory. And in every temptation you face, you don't have to rely on yourself. Yes, recognize the devil and the dangers he presents. Of course, fight back with Scripture. Stand your ground on the truth of God's Word. But most of all, find your champion. For us fights the valiant one. Amen.