

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Lent 1 (Invocavit) – February 18, 2024
Matthew 4:1-11 – Overcoming Temptation
Rev Peter Wagner

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

After he was baptized, “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.” This is the worst understatement of the Bible. Hungry? He was on the brink of death! Turning stones into bread must have consumed his every thought and impulse. It was an enormous, overwhelming temptation.

We should never underestimate physical temptation. Satan is a master of attacking our weak human bodies to get control of our minds. Eve took of the fruit and ate because she saw it was good to eat. Her physical temptation was real. When we just want enough money to be comfortable without stress, that easily gives birth to covetousness and greed. When Satan inflames the natural passions of our bodies, that leads to lust and anger.

But unlike Adam who had plenty to eat, unlike Adam who took what Eve offered without saying a word, Jesus refused. Even though Jesus shared a body like ours, he denied himself in the wilderness. He did not eat. He confidently spoke the word of God, to undo Adam's curse. The Son of David hurled a stone from the sling of God's word, “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

When Satan's physical attack failed, his second try was spiritual. Here was the Son of God, yet no one knew it. No one yet believed in Jesus or gave him glory. So prove yourself once for all, Jesus, that all may honor you. “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.’”

This temptation is also very strong for us. We want to prove ourselves, that we're good Christians, by our holy living. We look for find proof inside ourselves, when we should be looking outside at what Jesus has done for us. And we want to prove Jesus to the world. As if it all depends on me. I need to be good enough at debating, to win people for Christ. It's my responsibility to convince them. So we push the Holy Spirit aside, as if we can do his job better.

But Christ came in humility. Not to prove himself or get glory. “If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing.” He refused to cast himself down from the temple, because that would force his Father to glorify him. So the Son of David hurled another stone from Scripture, a stone that sank into Satan's lying forehead, “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Now the devil took his last shot. The temptation of compromise, the easy way out. He said, “All the kingdoms of the world and their glory. I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” No need for a cross, Jesus, no need for suffering, just make a bargain. Satan knew Christ's kingdom is not of this world. Satan knew Jesus refused to build his church by earthly power. But think of it, Jesus! How easy it would be, how many people would come to faith, if all the nations were yours. If no king or government opposed the gospel, millions would believe. And instead of a crown of thorns, you could save the world without suffering. Only bow down one quick time to me.

This temptation of compromise is very strong for us. Wouldn't it be easier for the church to bow down to the world, to give in a tiny bit, so we could win more people for Christ? Wouldn't it be easier to preach a comfortable Jesus who gets us, instead of a Jesus who takes sin seriously, who demands repentance? The church would be more appealing, if we just focused on the wise words of a great teacher, on his good example for life.

But Jesus refused it all. No compromise. He would go to the cross. By dying he would defeat death and make Satan bow down forever. So like David of old, he took the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, to cut the ancient serpent off. “Be gone, Satan! Worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.” Instantly, the devil was forced to flee.

How magnificently our Lord overcame all these temptations! Each was worse than anything we've ever faced or ever could bear. But Jesus mastered them all without sin. How can we learn to overcome Satan like him?

The answer is, we cannot. We cannot overcome Satan like Jesus, because we are not Jesus. Christ is David the champion; we are timid soldiers. Afraid and weak. When you read about our Lord's temptation, don't think, “I, too, must overcome temptation, like Jesus.” Read this story and confess, “I too often don't overcome temptation, and I need Jesus.”

We need Jesus. On our own, outside the church, outside of his word and sacraments, we will fall. The best we can do is flee. Flee from Satan, back to the word of God. Get away from whatever might tempt you. Get away from people who don't care for the things of God. Get away from unwholesome shows and internet addictions. Evaluate your habits, the way you spend your time. "All things are lawful," says Saint Paul, "But not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but not all things build up."

So flee temptation, and flee back to God. Run from Satan's lies, from all that leads to sin. Like Joseph with Potiphar's wife, escape as fast as you can. Escape by praying, "Lead us not into temptation," Lead me out of this, O Lord. Show me the way out. Because you have promised that you will never let me be tempted beyond what I can bear, and you will always provide a way of escape. So lead me back to Christ and his help. "Because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."

But what about the worst kind of temptations, the ones we aren't aware of? What if we think there's no problem? How can we flee and escape, if we see no danger? This is why we need to know God's word well, to recognize sin and see where Satan lurks. And we need others to help us see our weaknesses. So seek Christian friends you can confide in, brothers and sisters who are not afraid to point out your temptations. Solomon writes in Proverbs 27, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend." Sometimes the truth hurts, but without the truth we cannot escape.

So flee from temptation, and seek friends to help you find your blind spots. But then, there is also a time to stop fleeing. A time to turn and stand and fight. "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him... Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."

The time to turn and stand and fight is only after you have fled to Christ. Back to the refuge of the church, back to confessing your weakness, back to the place where Christ gives you the sword of his word, where he heals your wounds with his sacraments. Alone, you cannot make the devil flee. But in Christ, his strength is yours. Christians don't have to helplessly cave in to whatever the devil suggests. We can resist the devil and defeat him, because our Lord has already overcome. He was tempted in every way, yet without sin.

And now our Lord is at our side, he holds the field victorious. In Christ, we can wrestle against the cosmic forces of darkness. We can defy Satan, like in Luther's great battle hymn, "Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us, we tremble not, we fear no ill; they shall not overpower us. This world's prince may still scowl fierce as he will, He can harm us none. He judged; the deed is done; One little word can fell him."

That word – and it's only one little word in Greek, one small pebble from David's sling – that word is hupage. "Hupage! Be gone!" Be gone, Satan. Run for your life. Flee, but you won't get far. For Jesus the living Word is by my side. He will trap you and crush you beneath his cross. My champion, the Son of David, will hurl his stone at you to strike you down. He will cut off your head and bring your arrogance to nothing.

Jesus defies him too. He says, "Be gone, Satan!" Get out of here. Leave me alone! And do not touch any who are mine. For when you tempt and persecute my church and my Christians, you persecute me. You poke the apple of my eye. I will not tolerate it. So be gone! Leave my army alone. By one little word, one pebble from my sling, I will strike you down.

And Jesus defies him with another little word. A word that strikes terror to Satan's heart. Remember the word I spoke on the cross, Satan, with my dying breath. In Greek, tetelestai. "It is finished!" Tetelestai, you are finished. Your power to kill is broken forever. Now you are put to flight once for all. My kingdom stands forever. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.