

February 10, 2008
Lent 1

“Jesus Defeats Satan”

MATTHEW 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. ²After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” ⁴Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’^[a]” ⁵Then 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.’^[b]” ⁷Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’^[c]” ⁸Again, 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.” ¹⁰Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’^[d]” ¹¹Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

About two weeks ago we heard the terrible news from Iraq about two mentally handicapped girls who were coerced into carrying back packs filled with bombs into two crowded market places. Al Qaeda in Iraq detonated the bombs, killing the girls, along with over 100 people, many of them children. How could human minds ever devise such great evil? About the only explanation we can come up with is that there must a source of evil somewhere so great that it takes over and controls the minds of people. We know that source of evil as Satan.

For generations Christians have gathered on this first Sunday in Lent to hear the gospel accounts in Matthew, Mark and Luke that tell us the amazing account of Jesus’ victory over Satan in the wilderness. That victory means so much to us because of the daily battle we have in our lives with Satan and his evil spirits. Jesus called him a murderer from the beginning and the father of lies. When Peter boasted proudly about never being unfaithful to Jesus, Jesus told him that Satan wanted to sift him like wheat. Judas was capable of the dastardly deed of betraying Jesus because Satan entered into his heart. The vicious claws of Satan seem to be getting even longer and sharper. This morning we want to look again at how Jesus takes on Satan in combat and wins the victory. Jesus’ defeat of Satan is our defeat of Satan.

The battle

We are told that after his baptism “Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.” In the Lord’s Prayer we pray, “And lead us not into temptation.” Here it says The Holy Spirit wanted to lead Jesus into the desert to be tempted and Jesus was willing to be tempted in all parts as we are. He wants to show us beyond a shadow of doubt the victory he gained for us.

Satan knows exactly how to push the right buttons when it comes to temptation. He came to Jesus after he had been fasting for forty days and forty nights with these words, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus had the power as God to take a stone such as this and turn it into a loaf of bread fresh out of the oven. Red Durham wheat, stressed out and full of flavor from the high plains of Colorado, freshly ground into flour, baked in the oven, moist, fragrant, and with a slightly sweet nutty taste, covered with melting butter. Add a light bit of sweet clover honey and a fresh brewed cup of coffee. That will take care of the problem of hunger

Satan loves to come to us in our lowest and weakest moments. He tempts us to take shortcuts instead of relying on the Lord for help. Satan says, "Throw a pity party for yourself. That's better than relying on God's promises and trusting the power of prayer." Satan says, "Pop another pill, have another drink, indulge yourself in fantasies on the internet. Go to Costco and buy something for yourself that will make you feel better. Kick the dog when you are mad or your husband, or lash out at someone in your home and hurt them. You are going through a tough time. Release your anger and tension."

How did Jesus handle the temptation? He quotes from Old Testament Scripture in Deuteronomy where Moses wrote, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." God's Old Testament people learned to trust in the promises of the Lord to provide for their needs even when they became hungry and worried about their future. Remember how the Lord provided manna from heaven, water from the rock, and shoes and clothes that did not wear out. Jesus put his trust in his heavenly Father when he walked on this earth. He did not use his power as God to provide food and water for himself, or make the pain of suffering on the cross any less. Look at this spike in my hand. Jesus could have used his power as God to make it possible to have no pain at all, but instead he was "wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquity." Jesus lived by the Word of God and so can we.

Satan does not give up easily. "Then the devil took him into the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 'If you are the Son of God, tell 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 you foot against a stone.'" "Do a swan dive Jesus and just before your head hits the stones below, God's angels will sweep down and keep you from dashing your foot or hitting your head against the stone." The devil even quotes from the Psalm 91 but leaves out the important part that says the angels will keep us in their ways. He twists Scripture even appearing to be an angel of light, a coworker with God's holy angels.

Jesus cuts through the temptation and stabs it in the heart with another word from Scripture. "It is also written: Do not put the Lord you God to the test!" You've heard the popular saying when it comes to dieting and exercise, "No pain, no gain." Never was this truer than in the life of Jesus. There was no way to gain salvation for us except through the pain of the cross. If Jesus jumped from the top of the temple, and expected the heavenly Father to rescue him and the crowds to cheer wildly as if he were some super hero, then he would completely bypassed the Father's plan for his life and taken matters into his own hands. Jesus prayed in the Garden, "Not my will but yours be done."

It scares us to see how the devil took Jesus to the top of temple. He has the power to take

you into dangerous and difficult places where your faith will be put to the test. At such tough times you dare not say to yourself, "I am strong. I am invincible. Satan cannot get me." That's like driving with bald tires on your car on a rain slicked freeway and saying, "God will take care of me." It is similar to saying with Peter, "If anyone leaves you Lord I will never leave you." Rather than testing the Lord, we open his Word as Jesus did and turn to our favorite verses of Scripture for help such as, "Fear, not for I will help you, I will strengthen you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." I don't use Scripture in time of temptation, I know Satan will have his way with me and lead me into a plethora of danger zones. I have come to the personal conclusion that I am tempting the Lord if I do not daily make use of his Word to strengthen my faith. As Martin Luther wrote in his powerful hymn, "One little word can fell him"

The devil does not leave Jesus alone. He is relentless. He uses his power as the prince of this world to take Jesus into a very high mountain and show him all the kingdoms of the world. Satan has a way of flashing things into our minds and putting them together. He can drag up hurts from the past, put them into a collage of carefully collected hurts and drive you to anger and even into rage. He can put together a package of worldly pleasure that cause you to burn inside with desire to love the things of this world more than the Lord. The Bible calls this "the cravings of the flesh." Satan can string together and link together numerous small justifications of sin from your past life and lead you down a path to justify things that are wrong that would have repulsed and shamed you in the past. Then you lose your shame. He can flash hundreds of images, lustful images, into the mind and heart of a man who leaves his wife for another woman at the office. Scriptures tells us to resist the devil and he will flee from you, especially when he takes you up to the mountain to show you all the kingdoms of the world.

When I was a child, I always thought that Satan was a real fool when it came to this third temptation, especially when he says to Jesus, "All this I will give you if you will bow down and worship me." What I did not realize at the time was how subtle this temptation was. Imagine how appealing it was to Jesus who cared about people to control all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. Jesus had the power to make this world a better place, build on the good in people, and root out the evil. That's what we want in leaders today. Presidents of our country want to leave behind a legacy when they get out of office so the world will recognize them as a leader who made this world a better place. Jesus had the power to give the world everything it wanted. By doing this he would have given into Satan. Do remember the time when Peter tried to stop Jesus from going to Jerusalem to suffer and die? Jesus said, "Get behind me Satan!" Jesus did not want to give the world what it wanted but he did want to give the world what it needed. Satan said, "Go for the glory! Forget the cross and the shame and being forsaken by your Father for the sin of the world." Jesus wanted to go for the glory, the glory death on the cross, for he knew it was the only way to redeem us from the pit and crown us with love and compassion.

Again Jesus throttles Satan and sticks a dagger into his heart with the words of Scripture: "Away from me Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" Jesus put his heavenly Father first, even when it meant being forsaken by the Father on the cross. Then Satan left him for a while and we are told "angels came and attended him." If there is joy among the angels over one sinner who repents, think of how much joy there must been as the angels attended Jesus and celebrated the victory he had just won.

The victory

As I was finishing this sermon this past week, the phone rang, and it was young lady asking if our youth group wanted to attend a concert in Fresno. She asked a lot of questions, but I was nice. She wanted to know about why our youth group was not as large as it once was. The she asked what I was preaching on Sunday. I told her it was about Jesus temptations from the devil, and the victory that Jesus once for us. She wanted to know if I ever get discouraged, and I said I have to trust that Jesus is always on the throne taking care of his church. And then she asked if she could pray for me, and she did. She prayed that we might reach out to more young people in our church and work with families having problems. She prayed that the Lord would bless the message I was preaching about Jesus' temptation. Here was a total stranger ministering to me, not angels ministering to me as they did to Jesus, but a young lady, a young lady who talked real fast, a telemarketer, pouring her heart out in prayer and very much tuned into the needs I had at the moment.

The victory that Jesus gained over Satan is my victory and your victory. Today we go home knowing we are more than conquerors through him that loved us, and knowing nothing in all creation will ever separate us from the love of God that we have in Christ Jesus our Lord, a love that we see so clearly when Jesus defeated Satan. As we now sing together from the hymn "A Mighty Fortress"- "The kingdom's ours forever!" Amen.