

## “Life in the Wilderness of Temptation”

Luke 4:1-11

First Sunday in Lent

March 10, 2019

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

If this text is just about Jesus being our example, then we misunderstand it and rob him of his glory of being the perfect substitute in our place. On the other hand, if from Jesus’ temptation we learn nothing regarding our own, we sinners will excuse ourselves from wrestling against sin by saying, “Because Jesus did it, I need not wrestle against temptation.”

Yet, the Scriptures constantly admonish us in both. Of our own wrestling with sin, St. Paul writes, “The flesh lusts against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh, and the two are opposed to one another.”

But, of Jesus entering the world, the wilderness, the hour of temptation, going to the cross to stand in our place, the hymn says, “Sinless in the sinners’ stead”... and the Scriptures further say, “We have a high priest who can sympathize with us, for he was tempted like us, yet without sin.” So, with this sympathetic substitute going before us, and with this righteous Redeemer earning salvation for us,

we who rejoice in Him and trust Him and desire to follow Him... let us also learn from Him by watching Him, by meditating upon His wilderness warfare and learning from it for our own.

The first thing we must learn is that baptism may bring the peace and clear conscience of being a dear child of God, but it does not bring *calm and serenity* to life in this world. If you want life to be peaceful, worship this world and the devil and your sinful nature and they will make you happy as long as their temporary promises hold out. But once the rust and moths eat them away and the thieves take them from you, you will find yourself in the desert without an oasis, and your parched throat will thirst forever.

Instead, we have the waters of baptism, giving us a life not of this world, which then must wrestle against this world, the devil, and our sinful nature. In other words, baptism brings us into 'the church militant' – not fighting as the aggressor, but fighting as those who follow Christ through this world and to the life of the world to come. Such warfare may be divine, but it's certainly not serene. Martin Luther paints the picture better than I could, when he says:

“...every Christian as soon as he's baptized, is marshaled into an army in confrontation with the devil, and from his baptism onward is saddled with the devil who harasses him as long as he lives. If this bitter enemy cannot by his onslaughts get the better

of Christians and bring about their downfall, he seeks to hang them on the cross and kill them as he did Christ.”

You yourselves know what Luther here says; some of you know firsthand that becoming a Lutheran (perhaps through adult baptism or by adult instruction) has not made daily life easier, and perhaps all of us know that being a Lutheran in a society that detests or reinterprets God’s Law and Gospel can bring much heartache, not because Lutheranism is too narrow-minded and inflexible for daily life, but because daily life in this world as one who trusts the Word of God requires one to carry his own cross of relative isolation and loneliness. How important are those sitting around you, to get to know and love as fellow heirs of the promises of God and fellow confessors of the truth of God’s Word.

But even more important than these cherished fellow Christians is the comfort that is ours to behold and take shelter behind Christ himself. This is why we come each Lord’s Day, isn’t it? (I suppose, if you will not come for yourself, come for your fellow Christians’ sake. But, who wouldn’t come for themselves when we know the target the devil has put upon the back of the baptized?) What Christian isn’t tempted the same way that Christ was in our text – tempted to satisfy our hungers and cravings, to barter away our trust in God’s Word in order to end peer pressure, intimidation and persecution, and suffering of any kind? What Christian, like

Christ before us, has not been tested by worldly fame and wealth, the amassing of friends and finances to comfort and cheer us, even if only for giving up a little bit of the faith, a little bit of practicing the faith because (we reason) “the Lord knows I still believe him in my heart even if I will not confess him before men.” What Christian is not further tempted, as Christ before us, by false interpretation of Scripture, to just slightly reinterpret the Scripture to make it fit better with daily life for the sake of one’s own immediate gain or supposedly enduring peace with the world?

And, if these temptations of Jesus in the wilderness (and really of the first Adam in the garden) do not overtake us, then the devil comes after us with full fury to “get us by the throat and strangle us to death” Luther illustrates.

What does this mean? When the devil goes for the throat, he does not tempt with the world’s promises; rather he tempts by using us against ourselves. The temptations we don’t often consider of Christ in the wilderness was the temptation to retaliate and – with his own throat, mouth, lips and voice, bring himself to ruin. This is where we too easily fall, as the devil knows how to poke and prod us so that impatience and desire for revenge wells up within us, and we quickly rise up in supposed self-righteousness. How often have you been maligned or sinned against and, in your desire for retribution, you go for their neck and end up giving the devil a strangle-hold on yours. Or, how often have you desired to play the victim rather than

turn the other cheek and in so doing you have sinned against your neighbor rather than loved him with long-suffering.

Yes, in many and various ways, the devil is always active, always on the prowl, always ready to slither his serpentine body into the tent of those who leave enough opening for his head. He need not be terribly original with his temptations and deception because we're no different in our weaknesses than the sinners of every generation before us. Sure, certain temptations and struggles of warfare might appear on the surface to be different – the issues we face today (such as the pressure to acquiesce to a society trying to be genderless because people's minds disagree with their bodies) were not fathomable just two generations ago. But, the underlying condition – shame of one's body and identity – go back to Eden when sin-stricken Adam and Eve were suddenly aware of their bodies and were ashamed.

And because the devil need not be new and creative in his efforts, and because the Word is replete with exhortation about those temptations of which we grow weary of hearing, we ought also learn from our Lord that we ought not let down our guard against the 'same-old, same-old' and certainly need not seek out our own ways of showing our great faith.

Jesus does not seek out such trials on his own; he is led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. So, too, for the Christian; while the Scriptures say that the Lord will test to strengthen us in the faith, and

that the devil will use such situations for tempting to destroy our faith, it is not for the Christian to seek out such testing on his own. How many there are who are taught or who teach themselves to take bold steps and seek out opportunities to test their faith, to show God how faithful they are (new converts inexperienced in the faith think they are strong enough to wield the sword of Truth against heterodoxy and heresy or to branch out and study and discern theology on their own; long-time Christians think their faith has grown beyond the simple teaching of the Catechism and that they can test their faith by missing Sunday after Sunday the Lord's sustenance or by doing supposedly extra-virtuous good works rather than living in the humility of vocation) ... and such self-sought testing turns into self-inflicted wounds, and pride turns into despair and doubting as the devil overtakes them.

Instead, as Luther says, every Christian is dutybound "to earnestly hear God's Word and its preaching, diligently learn and become well-versed therein. We also should persevere in earnest prayer that God would let his kingdom come among us, not lead us into temptation, but graciously deliver us from all evil." We know what that sounds like: that's from the Lord's Prayer. Indeed, the *first* petitions of the prayer, "Hallowed be Thy Name" and "Thy kingdom come" ... those petitions are defended by the next "Thy will be done on earth, as in heaven." There Luther explains, "God's will is done when he breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil,

the world, and our sinful flesh, which do not want us to hallow God's name or let his kingdom come, and when He strengthens and keeps us firm in his Word and faith until we die."

Notice that meaning: he first recognizes the struggles of the faith in the warfare of temptation wrought by the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh, which do not want us to hallow God's name or let his kingdom come. But, such temptation is fought off when the Christian in every situation learns to pray and live by the certainty of God's Word and will: "*Thy will be done.*" But we of ourselves have no strength to remain confident in such prayer and faith, thus the Lord must "keep us firm in His Word and faith until we die." But, the only way for him to do that is to gather us together... thus, Luther's exhortation again, that every Christian is dutybound to "earnestly hear God's Word and its preaching, diligently learn and become well-versed therein... [and] preserve in earnest prayer."

And this all because we realize that we utterly depend upon Christ. And this is the last point our text teaches; the last lesson for us is to consider that Christ in the wilderness is there because no man before or after could endure temptation perfectly. To learn to follow Jesus is of no use if we learn to follow him as an example of what we can supposedly perfect and accomplish for our salvation. Instead, we learn to follow him first by hearing and learning that He is our salvation; He is the New Adam, who overcomes temptation; He is the new Israel, who remains faithful for the 40 marks of time in

the wilderness; He is the righteous One who marches ahead of us: better than Moses teaching people to hope in the Passover lamb, Jesus is the Passover Lamb... better than Moses saving the people by parting waters, Jesus saves through waters... better than Moses feeding the people with bread from heaven, Jesus is the bread from heaven... better than Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness for all to look on in faith, Jesus is the sin-bearer lifted high for all to look on in faith... better than Moses bringing them to the doorstep of the promised land, Jesus our Joshua brings us into the promised land... better than Moses dutifully following God's plans for the tabernacle and God's dwelling with man, Jesus is God's tabernacle in the flesh and his dwelling with man.

In all of it, Jesus is righteous and perfect, enduring every arrow and dart of the devil, fulfilling all righteousness, upholding God's holy will, and bringing it all to completion that the Old Covenant might give way to the New, the devil's head is crushed underfoot, and we have the identity of Christ in our baptism and, thus, the blessing and inheritance as sons of God.

And, if this is our Victor, if this Christ is the general who leads the charge onto a battlefield he has already overcome, then why would any Christian desire anything else than to keep eyes fixed firmly on Christ, learn from him to cherish the Holy Word of Truth, and be strengthened by Him in the mysteries of the Divine Service to endure life in this wilderness of temptations, and be sustained in the

Word and faith until we die and are graciously taken by His holy angels from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven?

In the Name of the Father  
And of the Son  
And of the Holy Spirit.  
+ AMEN +

Rev. Mark C. Bestul  
Calvary Lutheran Church  
March 10, 2019