

Mark 1:9-15  
First Sunday in Lent  
February 18, 2024

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

Our text, from St Mark's gospel, "The Spirit immediately drove [Jesus] out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

During the Epiphany season we read the first third of this text as it was attached to what came before it, and we read the final third of this text as *it* was attached to what came after it. But, today, the middle third is our focus – the temptation of Jesus – and, yet, here are those other thirds, those verses we've heard in recent weeks... and, in reading them again in this more continuous context, we see the unmistakable relationship between Jesus' baptism, his temptation, and his preaching of the gospel. In fact, it really is a microcosm of sorts, isn't it, of Christ's entire ministry: His baptism – the Chosen of God, the Messiah; His temptation – a microcosm of His substitution for us sinners, enduring the devil and the broken world as our righteousness; His preaching the gospel – a microcosm of the whole life of the Church spoken into existence from Christ's mouth as fishers of men go out in His name.

Yes, we can see the whole picture right here in this text; and, therefore, we can see the *central* importance of Christ's righteous procession to the cross, as first on display in his temptation. Without His temptation as our substitute, we will not recognize him as the Chosen One; without the temptation endured and completed in all righteousness, He will have no authority to preach "The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

But, as our text says in short order, He does endure the temptation; He is the righteous substitute; He does complete the mission in perfect obedience, that He might fulfill all righteousness and bring to us the Gospel of salvation.

That Mark does not include any of the details Matthew and Luke do ought help us learn of Christ's temptation not as an example for our own, for an example always seems to include step-by-step illustration and picture of how to succeed. In some ways, we can read Matthew's and Luke's accounts of Christ's temptation in that way: "Christ appealed to the Word; so ought you. Christ remained faithful in temptations of that which was good for food, pleasing to the eye, desirable to make one wise; so ought you." Yes, there is an example of sorts in reading of Christ's temptation in Matthew's and Luke's gospels.

But in Mark's gospel, it is so brief and so closely tied to His baptism and His preaching that we can hear it in the light of the One on His mission: "Here he is declared in Baptism; here he is your righteous substitute; and here he proclaim to you the gospel of the kingdom of God." That's our text.

And that's why our Old Testament reading is the account of Abraham and Isaac. Not because Abraham was 'tempted' – God does not tempt toward faithlessness, He tests to strengthen faith. No, the Old Testament reading is not about Abraham being tempted; it's about the answer to Isaac's question: "Father, where is the lamb for the sacrifice?" And Abraham's answer: "The Lord will provide."

And, thus, in our Gospel Reading, we hear the fulfillment of that so unmistakably: "The Lord has provided!" Here is the chosen; here is the righteous substitute enduring all for you; here is the One worthy to proclaim, 'the time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel.'

Yet, by his own words, Jesus calls us to likewise wrestle with sin: "*repent* and believe the gospel." Repentance isn't a mere formality of confessing guilt. It's a way of life, isn't it? A turning from sin and combatting it rather than indulging in it.

And, not only from Jesus' own preaching may we hear the admonition to wrestle, but also in the other Gospel accounts that

record Jesus' temptation, we certainly can learn from His dependence upon the Word, His own wrestling against temptation, His fidelity to the heavenly Father.

Thus, this first Sunday in Lent, the temptation of Jesus our substitute also calls us to wrestle against temptation; to understand it rightly; to understand its *source* rightly.

I received a wonderful question from a member recently about why the Lord would allow Satan to remain upon the earth, why the victory of the cross doesn't more visibly (or, we might say, 'experientially') mean the devil's defeat. The answer is two-fold: on the one hand, we might recognize the hidden will and wisdom of God and acknowledge He need not always share with us the "why" of His divine plan for our deliverance. On the other hand, He *has* revealed to us who the true enemy is, and such truth ought inform our understanding of sin and temptation and even of the devil.

Who (as God's Word has revealed to us) who is the true enemy? It's not the devil. He may be the 'old evil foe,' the tempter, the roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. But, he's not the true enemy. The true enemy is Old Adam, your sinful nature, and your Old Adam's desire to be god.

In the perfection of the garden, what could the devil do but tempt; but he could do not cause sin. He couldn't take the

garden by force. He could only tempt. It was man who ran with the temptation; man who engaged it and played with it; man who indulged in it and gave it life. True, the Scriptures say the devil deceived the woman, but they say sin entered the world through Adam, man who indulged temptation and gave it life.

And the same is true after the Fall. How does our epistle reading say it? –

“Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.”

When Christ was tempted, did the devil not simply appeal to Jesus’ desires? “This stone – turn it into bread and make it good for food... This sight of vast kingdoms – do you not desire to rescue and claim the whole world? ...You can do it without tasting the cup of death ... This temple height - is it not your desire to prove yourself the Wisdom from above, the Son of God?”

Yes, even with Jesus, the devil played to His desires; but, the devil could not force Christ (just as he cannot force you) into sin. And, perhaps he underestimated Christ’s perfect and righteous and divine desire – to do His Father’s will, to love His Father’s Word, to remain faithful unto His substitutionary death that He may win for you, and give to you, the crown of life.

But, this is why we will always despair when only seeing Jesus as the great example. His will, His desire (even as true man) is from His divine conception perfect and holy; our desire is – from our conception in Adam’s fall – imperfect and unholy. We will never meet ‘Jesus the example.’

But, we have Jesus the substitute. We have Jesus the savior. We have the one who came as righteousness for us, who bore our sins for us, who went to the cross for us, who died the sinners’ death for us. In his death, he crushed the serpent’s head, so that Satan is indeed defeated and, in that victory, Christ put a great enmity and divide between Satan and the Church, so that in Holy Baptism, Satan is cast out of your heart and your body is now the temple of the Holy Spirit, that the Spirit may now nurture and strengthen you – not only against the devil – but against your own sinful nature.

You see, Satan is no longer the great enemy. Your own sinful nature is. What the sinful nature dies in death, can Satan harm new Adam in heaven? – no! My own Old Adam is a greater danger to me than Satan. In fact, Satan is harmless if not for the Old Adam. To be sure, Satan can oppress and irritate and torment the Christian (“with might of ours can naught be done...” / “a messenger of Satan to torment me”); but such cannot forcibly remove Christ and baptism; it can only motivate Old Adam. Old

Adam loves to listen to himself and thus, listen to Satan and to the world as they heap praises upon Old Adam's self-love; Old Adam loves to listen to anything other than the Word of God... in fact, loves to question and critique the Word of God, to stand on his own and be his own man, lord, and god.

So, in many ways, one might say, the great waywardness of the world full of 'Old Adams' is not the *result* of the devil's strength, but the *source* of it. If the whole world was full of Christians, and if those Christians perfectly subdued the Old Adam in their daily baptismal life, Satan would be powerless to entice, to accuse, to deceive. Christ has done His job of rendering Satan powerless against the Church; the 'old evil foe' is not only judged, but is without great influence where New Adam lives joyfully in Christ's baptism... until Old Adam rears his ugly head and would rather delight in the temptations of Satan than in the truth of Christ Jesus.

In short, where Christians live faithfully according to the Word of God, we see how little influence Satan truly has anymore. Sure, he's stronger than us, but not than our Baptism; he cannot *force* us from Christ, but may only be a 'salesman' of sorts. In that sense, he truly has no power over us; he exists in the shame and impotence of his cruciform defeat, all to Christ's glory and praise.

But, where Old Adam holds sway in the sinner's heart, either subtly in the life of Christians or openly in the Christless world, then it would *appear* Satan is more powerful. In truth, it's Old Adam who is powerful, and Old Adam regularly and in many various ways calls on Satan to tell him what he wants to hear.

And that brings us back to our epistle reading: "each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death." That is conception and life according to the Fall, isn't it? But, James' epistle doesn't stop there. It doesn't say, "So, get used to it and learn to live this way." Rather, he points us to the new reality, the greater reality, the baptismal reality that comes from above: "Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers (James says). Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above" (we often use that to think of good gifts of daily bread, but is daily bread properly known apart from the baptismal life? How does James continue?) – "coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." (Namely, the Father's holy will and gracious desire has always been and always will be your salvation in Christ Jesus and your baptismal life blessed by daily bread provision unto the inheritance of the new creation in the life of the world to come. Or, how does James say it?) – "Of the Father's own will he



brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.” Is that a description of merely the first creation, or of baptismal life and the new creation? What’s the context? Is it not the baptismal life? Earlier in verse 12, “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life.” Yes that same crown of life Christ has secured and won for you by his righteous suffering, that same crown of life that required Christ’s holy blood and innocent death... that crown of life is not given as a matter of the first creation, but of the new creation. Thus, into the new creation, “Of his own will the Father brought us forth by the word of truth.” In other words, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” And, if he has baptized us into and brought us forth into this new life, then let us daily live in it with holy joy ...*and* with holy wisdom that the true enemy is that which wants us to give up the new life for the Old life. The true enemy is not the one who tempts – Satan can tempt, the world can tempt – but, if not for the ego of the Old Adam, such temptation is toothless.

So, as we look to Jesus our substitute chosen for the mission, Jesus our substitute in the wilderness, Jesus our substitute upon the cross, let us always be humbly and penitently mindful of why we need Jesus the substitute and not Jesus the

example. Jesus the example could show us how to handle Satan, and then expect our perfect following of that example. But Jesus the substitute must be the Second Adam for those plagued by their inclusion in the sinful lineage of the first Adam.

But, because of Jesus the Substitute, not only are Satan's days numbered, but so is Old Adam's. When you die, it is not the New Man conceived and born by *baptism* that dies; it is the Old Man conceived and born of Adam that dies. And when Christ gathers the Church unto Himself on the final day, the lineage of Old Adam that once plagued the Church will be no more... and Old Adam's existence will be confined to the godless world, and Satan with it... and as the Old Creation is destroyed, so also will be Old Adam and Satan. In other words, "the devil, the world, and my sinful flesh" will finally be exterminated.

Until then, follow where your Lord has led... not as your example, but as your Savior. Wrestle against temptation because – on account of Christ – sin is no longer your lord and master and no longer has dominion over you. And, when you tire and grow weary, when you reflect and self-examine, when you see in the mirror how busy narcissist Old Adam is, then take heart and rejoice in Christ's preaching that you may "repent and believe the gospel"... the gospel that Christ is no mere example, but your Substitute provided by the Lord for the sacrifice... that you may

live in the certainty of Christ's righteousness and in the joy of your salvation.

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

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