

March 10, 2019 – Luke 4:1-13

Does anybody else find the circumstances of our Gospel today a little... absurd? I mean obviously, the temptation of Jesus is an important event in the life of Christ. One that we reflect upon every year as the beginning of our Lenten journey. We start out our 40 days of fasting and self-denial by looking to the 40 days of fasting and self-denial that Jesus undertook to begin his ministry. That much makes sense.

What doesn't really make sense, at least at first glance, is the whole idea of the devil trying to tempt Jesus in the first place. Why bother? He's the Son of God, for pete's sake. You really think you're gonna get anywhere with him? You really think you could actually tempt God into sin? How dumb is Satan?

Well, maybe not as dumb as we think. Human beings are weak creatures. And we are so easily tempted. A single image. A single word. A single emotion. And we quickly tumble down the rabbit hole of sin. We're easy targets. And the devil knows it.

Because he's been tempting us since the beginning of creation. Successfully tempting us since the beginning of creation. Thousands of years of humanity, tempted into sin without so much as a struggle.

Satan's been doing this for a long time. And he's really good at it. So yes, he knew who Jesus was. And yes, he probably knew it was a long shot.

But he also knew that Jesus was fully God and fully man. And it was the weakness of human flesh that had bit hook, line, and sinker on pretty much every lie Satan had ever told. When you've been successfully doing something for 5000 years, give or take, you tend to stick with it. And Satan isn't exactly known for lacking self-confidence. So, as crazy as it sounds, it also kind of makes sense that he would give it a try on Jesus.

And the approach that Satan takes is an old one, but an effective one. Because he attacks Jesus by tempting him with doubt. Yes, doubt is a sin. In fact, it's the first sin. It was doubt about God's love and care for Eve that led her to question whether he was holding something good back from her. It was doubt about God's warning that led her to ignore his wrath and eat from the fruit.

St Paul tells us that it was faith in God's promises that was credited to Abraham as righteousness. And I believe the inverse is also true. It is doubt in God's promises that is judged against us as the core of all sins.

And doubt is a powerful weapon against Christians. You see, our Christian faith holds us back from a host of sinful choices. Our faith is what tells us what is godly and what is not. Our faith is what warns us when temptations come.

Which means that if Satan is going to open us up to a vast array of sinfulness and immorality, he must first find a way to get past that wall of faith. And doubt is a pretty effective weapon for tearing apart our faith one stone at a time.

So when we watch Satan attack Jesus in the desert, we aren't just watching one attack against one human being. Nor are we watching something unique or unusual. In fact, the attack that Satan launches is the exact same attack that he uses against countless Christians. And it goes something like this...

“You’re hungry, Jesus. You’re hungry because you’re human. You’re just a human. You’re nothing more than a human. If you were God, these stones would become bread before your very eyes. But they’re not. Because you’re just an ordinary human being like every one else.”

“You’re weak, Jesus. You think you’ve come here with all this power, but you’re nothing. This is my turf. These are my people. I’m the godfather here. You wanna work in my town, you kneel down to me.”

“You’re useless, Jesus. You’ve got nothing of value. No fame. No wealth. Nothing. You’re gonna walk through this world as a nobody until they nail you to a cross and forget you ever existed. You wanna be somebody? Show them who you are. Fly from the roof of the temple. Be famous. That’s what life is about.”

And you know, those words may have been directed at Jesus, but they apply just as well to each one of us...

“You’re hungry. If God cared about you then he’d get rid of all your money problems. But you’re not a child of God. You’re nobody.”

“You’re weak. You can’t fight this world. Don’t even try. God doesn’t have any authority here. You try to be good, stand up for what you believe in, and you’ll get crushed.”

“You’re useless. What’s the point of trying to be a disciple of Christ? It’s not gonna get you anywhere. Who are the powerful people in this world? The bankers who steal from pension funds. The celebrities who cheat on their wives. The politicians who lie through their teeth. What does being a disciple of Jesus Christ get you? A lot of pain and suffering, that’s what.”

Identity. Power. And mission. The three aspects of Jesus’ life and ministry that Satan tried to tempt him to doubt. The three aspects of our life and ministry that Satan tries to tempt us to doubt. But where Jesus was alone in the desert fending off Satan’s attacks, we have a powerful tool at our disposal: Jesus’ own words in response to Satan.

So when Satan tries to tell you that if God really cared about you, he wouldn’t make you worry about money and bills, you tell him that there is far more to life than money and food and clothes. Those things will only sustain you to the grave. But the Word of God will sustain you to eternity. And that is a gift that God has never withheld from us.

When Satan tries to tell you that you’re too weak to stand up to the powers of this world and to the evil that surrounds you, you tell him that he’s absolutely right. You are too weak. And that is exactly why you worship and serve one who is far stronger than any power of this world, Satan included.

When Satan tries to tell you that it is useless to be a Christian, that faith, morality, and righteousness are pointless in a world that rewards evil and punishes good, you tell him that you do not question the will of God almighty. Although there are things in this world that I will never understand, I believe with all my heart that God has a plan, I am in it, and I will see it carried out on the last day. Because I have already seen it carried out in the resurrection of Jesus. So I will never put my God to the test on that.

Satan’s been tempting humanity for a long time. He’s really good at it. But he had never seen the likes of Jesus before. He had never seen a faith like His before. But he’s seen an awful lot of it since then.

Because we are each baptized into His faith, nourished by His blood, and strengthened by His Word. So that when Satan meets you in the desert, when Satan finds that “opportune time” to attack – and he will – you can be sure he meets more than you than you alone. He meets more than an ordinary man. He meets Christ living within you.

He meets God's Son. God's forgiveness. God's salvation. Living in your heart. So that whether the temptation draws you into sin or not, ultimately, he cannot win. He cannot drag you into hell. He cannot take you from your Father's hand.

Because Christ defeated Satan in that desert. Christ defeated Satan every day of His ministry. And, most of all, Christ defeat Satan on the cross. The devil cannot defeat us any longer. Temptation or no temptation, sin or no sin, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

So whether you cry out to God, "Jesus is Lord," with joy or you cry out to Him, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," with utter despair. It doesn't matter. Cry out to the Lord and you will be saved. Believe that God raised Jesus from the dead, and hold tight to that forgiveness. Look past that human weakness that puts you to shame and know that, in all things, the God who defeated the very worst that Satan could throw against Him lives within you. Amen.