

February 26, 2023 – Matthew 4:1-11

Every year, on the first Sunday of Lent, we hear the same Gospel lesson: the Temptation of Jesus. Because this event is recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we hear one of those three accounts every single year, as we rotate through the 3 year cycle of readings. We actually do the same thing with the event that precedes this one as well. The Baptism of Jesus is also recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke and we also rotate through those readings. Which is a great thing.

There's just one problem with this whole system. While the Baptism of our Lord is scripturally, chronologically, immediately prior to Jesus' temptation, in the church year, we hear about it way back at the beginning of Epiphany, almost 2 months ago. Which tends to separate the two events in our minds as being unrelated to each other. But they are completely related. The two events should not, cannot be separated.

At Jesus' baptism, John says something we can all relate to. He says he would have preferred that he should be baptized by Jesus, not Jesus by John. It's an understandable sentiment. All he could think about was the privilege and benefit of being baptized by the Son of God. By the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. It makes perfect sense.

Except that his Baptism of Jesus was going to be different. This Baptism was also Jesus' Messianic "ordination." I use that term because it's a good analogy. When a man finishes seminary, it's easy to assume that just because he's successfully graduated, he's automatically a pastor.

But that's not true. He's not a pastor until he's ordained by another pastor. Until that point, he's just a man with a Master of Divinity degree. He's a man who is probably qualified to be a pastor, but he's not there yet. It's only after his ordination that he has the title, the vocation, the identity of "pastor."

The same is somewhat true of Jesus. When he goes into the Jordan River, he has all of the qualifications of the Messiah. He's the incarnate Son of God, come to earth to save his people from their sins. But the title of Messiah, Christ, "anointed one," isn't really his until he's ordained into it. Not just by John, but by his Father and by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' baptism was a public ordination into the office of Messiah. It set the name of the Father upon the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit. His ministerial career was at its pristine beginning. He would now embark on the work of saving the lost sheep of Israel. And the lost sheep of this whole sinful world.

Except... he didn't. He didn't dive directly into his public ministry. Instead, *"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. And the tempter came..."*

Why? Why would Jesus wait to begin his public ministry? Why would he be led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit? And why would the devil choose this exact moment to tempt him?

Well, let's look at this from the perspective of... a fish. Now, I'm not much of a fisherman. I don't think I've held a fishing pole in about 25 years, and my experience back then was mostly bluegill and small mouth bass. Little fish.

But I've been told that fishermen who fish for bigger fish, who fish in the ocean, have a problem that they have to watch out for. Because if you catch a fish and leave it on a stringer sitting in the water, if you wait long enough, it's very likely going to be dinner for a bigger fish. In fact, it's very likely going to be dinner for a shark. Your wounded fish has become bait. Bait that a shark will immediately sniff out and be drawn towards.

That is kind of what happened to Jesus. The moment he was baptized. The moment that voice of the Father rang out *"This is my Son, whom I love."* The moment the Holy Spirit descended upon him. The devil sniffed, and he smelled blood in the water.

Because he realized that God had become man. God had taken on the weakness of human flesh. God had accepted all our frailty. The devil couldn't hope to defeat almighty God in heaven. But God on earth? God made flesh? That was a tempting target.

Made all the more tempting by what Jesus did next: wandering into the wilderness. Alone. Defenseless. Weakened by the elements. Harsh winds. Cruel sun. Cold nights, sleeping on the ground.

And all this while fasting. Fasting for 40 days. Probably so weak he could barely stand up. God had taken on human flesh and then tortured that flesh until it was near death. Deprived that flesh of every luxury. Every pleasure. The devil's work was 90% complete.

All he had to do was push him over the edge with the most basic temptations. Hunger, pride, the lust for power. It would be so easy. And then the Messiah would be gone. God's plan of salvation ruined. It would be the devil's greatest victory since Adam and Eve.

And so, like a shark swimming toward a wounded fish, the devil struck. And at that moment he discovered that his target wasn't quite as weak as he thought. Because Jesus didn't stumble into this confrontation with the enemy accidentally. He knew it was coming. He was planning on it. He was seeking it out. He wanted to face the devil.

Because in that encounter he proved himself worthy to be the Messiah. Worthy to be the one to carry our sin to the cross. Worthy to be the pure and sinless Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Worthy to be a new Adam and undo the curse of death.

The devil would never confront Jesus like that again, in his entire ministry. In fact, the next time that Jesus meets a demon, the demon shrieks in fear and begs for his life. They know that Jesus has beaten their boss at his own game and they are terrified at what he's going to do to them.

If the devil can't tempt Jesus when he's at his very worst, then his only weapon he has, the only option he has left is to kill him. Swallow him in death. Put him in the tomb and out of this earth. But we all know, that doesn't work either.

In his baptism, Jesus made himself a target for the devil's temptations. What we don't realize though, is that in every Baptism, we repeat that scene. Every time a person is baptized, whether they are a tiny infant held in their mother's arms or an old man leaning over the font, every time a person is baptized they become a target for the devil's temptations.

Because in that baptismal water, the Father declares to us, "This is my son, whom I love." In that baptismal water, the Holy Spirit descends upon us and gives us his anointing. And every time, the devil sniffs... and smells blood in the water.

And he sees another way to try and ruin God's plan of salvation. He doesn't need to go after the unbaptized. After unbelievers. They're already his. He's already devoured them in sin. And soon enough he'll devour them in death. Those fish are already in his belly. But a newly baptized child of God? Mmm... that's a tasty meal.

And so just like Jesus, we are baptized, ordained not as the Messiah, but as His disciples. And the Spirit leads us into the wilderness of this world. Where the devil attacks. And attacks. And attacks. Tempting us over and over and over again. Until we're weak and weathered and starving.

And we cry out, "God, I can't do this. I'm not Jesus. I am not like God, knowing good and evil. I am a poor, miserable sinner. And I need your help. I need your grace. I need your forgiveness."

And God says, "Good. You're learning. Here's what you need." And he shelters us in the shadow of his presence, so that the sun does not beat down on us anymore. He feeds us with the bread of life, so that we are never hungry again. He causes springs of living water to well up inside of us, leading to eternal life.

Most of all, he gives us his Word. The same Word that Jesus used to defeat the devil. To parry and counter every attack. The same Word that reminds us time and time again that we are his beloved children. That he will never leave us or forsake us.

And that our mission is not to defeat the devil. Because that's already been done. The devil attacks us with the lie that his attacks matter. That if he defeats us we are condemned to death and hell.

But there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The battle has already been won. The devil lost. Jesus defeated him in the wilderness. Jesus defeated him on the cross. Jesus defeated him in the empty tomb.

Our victory is not found in defeating the devil. Our victory is found in pointing to Jesus. And saying, "I am his disciple. I am his baptized child. You could not devour him. You will not devour me." Amen.