

The Kingdom of God is at hand, here today, now. His Baptism has become your Baptism. Thus, you are a beloved son of God the Father, you are well-pleasing to Him. Christ has bound Himself to you, you bear His Name. The Father has opened heaven for you; poured out the Holy Spirit upon you.

For all of that, you now find yourself living in warfare between God and the devil. You're driven into a wilderness of personal conflict with the devil, the world, your own sinful flesh. Day by day, you're attacked, you're tempted to doubt, deny, disobey His Word. The devil tempts you, in order to rob you of the life you've been given and bring you to death and condemnation. At every point in your life, in success, in your suffering and failure, in what you have, in what you covet or don't have.

On the other side, your dear Father would test you, as He tested Abraham. Not tempt you to sin, by no means, but to instruct, strengthen your faith in His Word and promises of your Baptism. God tests those whom He loves. Testing reveals faith. Temptation seeks to destroy faith. That's the difference.

Trust the Lord. Cling to His Word, come hell or high water against you. Do not despair, ever, of His goodness, His care. He alone, your strength in battle.

Thanks be to God, His Kingdom does not rest upon your faithfulness, nor even your repentance and faith. The Kingdom of God is at hand in Jesus.

Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil: In His Baptism and yours. In His temptation for you. In the preaching of the Gospel and His passion, delivered to you.

Temptations. You know this well. Temptations come big and small. Cheat on taxes, business dealings, work timesheet. Cheat on a test, plagiarized. Sneak around on the internet. No Lie to cover-up your crime or make yourself look good. time Bible study, family devotions. At least put up a fight! At times we give in so easy. And you always have a good excuse and can rationalized why you did it when you're caught. He always catches you doing it even when others don't.

I think CS Lewis's words in the Screwtape Letters are insightful: "It is funny how people always picture demons as putting things into their minds: in reality their best work is done by keeping things out." Tempted to satisfy your hunger, appetites with your desires. Tempted to think that in some way God is holding out on you; you know better to bring you pleasure, make you happy, give you what you deserve; to think evil is for you good. You are surrounded by lies, that will never satisfy you and always lead to death.

What can I do? So come the questions from those who look in dismay at the mountain of wrongs or shootings in the world, in and our workplaces, and homes. What can I do? How tempting it is to suggest that Christians must find refuge away from it all while we watch the world disintegrate. How tempting it is to live behind the facade that no one can make a difference -so why try.

Christian character counts. Whether or not you see any difference, Christian character counts. Whether or not you believe it is even noticed or ignored, Christian character counts. As we make our way into a year fraught with the same old problems, same old violence, same old family problems; the call to you who live from the baptismal font to the table by the calling of the Word: Christian character counts.

The noble calling of our Christian lives matters. It matters whether we see it or not. If no one else is watching, God is. Part of the wonderful surprise of baptism and its life of faith flowing from that font is the realization that God IS watching, Is working in me and through me -- not only to condemn what's wrong but seek what is good and right and holy. A life in Christ is not some discipline that steals our joy and shackles our freedom but it what true joy and freedom and the only, real life is all about.

In the home Christian character: supports, encourages, forgives, brings joy in God's gift of life together. In the community, Christians lives not in secret or shying away but holding up truth, the light, that it enlightens everyone. This happens not only in words of explicit witness, but in our actions. At school or work, you manifest the character of your faith by working to the glory of God. Exhibit Christian character even as you're limited by what you can say about the Gospel. How you serve, treat others; is as important there as taking about God.

You are justified by Christ, salvation secure; You have holy vocations; live and work and play as His people, in His gifts. The Holy Spirit does not take over our wills but teaches us to love what is holy and good; to seek after it, and, by the grace of God, to accomplish it. Walk worthy of the life given you in your baptism and seek to be and do the things of God within the domain of your daily life.

Christian character counts. You matter, you make a difference solely because you belong to Him and the Kingdom is yours, so you have nothing to fear.

This wilderness, surrounded by the enemy. Major Winters, a Lutheran WW2 hero, of the Band of Brothers movies, was told at the Battle of Bastogne, hey, you're surrounded. His response, "we're paratroopers, we're suppose to be surrounded". You're baptized, you're suppose to be surrounded. Behind enemy lines in this wilderness, the war rages, you'll undergo various trials, your faith will be tested. Like Israel, Satan will tempt you to think Christ has abandoned you. Your sinful flesh will cry out in despair: "we'll never reach the Promised Land; life was better under slavery." But those are lies. Fight, it is never in vain. Satan, his minions, and the world cannot win. Don't give up or surrender. You're not alone. But for us fights the Valiant One, who holds the field, the battlefield, forever. He will lead us through this wilderness, during the 40 days of Lent, and always. The victory has been won, the Kingdom our, your remains forever.