**2/26/23**

**The Ultimate Strike Out**

**Matthew 4:1-11**

Today we enter this building, or join on the conference call, yet again to gather as a team… a community… a congregation… a church family. More importantly, we do so as a group of believers. We often question many things when we enter this building or join on the conference call, but one thing I do not believe we are ever questioning is that sense of community. I do not believe we are questioning if the person in the pew in front of us, or in the pew behind us, may have a similar belief structure. I do not believe we are questioning if the person that called in on the conference call right before us, or right after us, is here for the same purpose or belief. We all join together, and are all comforted by the fact that we indeed do have common beliefs. We join together because we know that there is strength in numbers. We join together because we crave learning a little bit more. We join together because we humble ourselves as it is written in 1st Thessalonians chapter 5, verse 11 to “Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.” (5) We in fact pray together for our common needs. We pray together about our common struggles. We pray together by encouraging and motivating one another on to love and good deeds.

Out there in the battlefield of life we do not always get the blessed reassurance we get when we are here with our brothers and sisters. It is not always easy out there when we are fighting and standing up against that which we do not believe. However, it is different in here. It is different when we stand together with our team… our friends… our family in this safe space. We praise God that we get this opportunity to join one another, and we do not take it for granted.

I admittedly know that might come off as an awkward way to start out my sermon this morning, but I believe it is vital as we explore our Gospel Reading today. For example, I know that while I was growing up that playing team sports was essential to my growth as a person, and my growth in the belief and trust of a team. I am sure some, or many, of you can relate. I knew when I stepped out on a field, or on a court, I could not win the game by my own efforts. I knew that I could put my best effort forth, but that effort combined with the effort of my teammates and coaches was what was going to determine the victory or defeat that particular day. Now, I played several sports over the years, and learned a lot through all of them. However, Volleyball and Baseball were the two most influential of those sports that I played. Today my focus will primarily be a bit more on baseball though. As I feel today we get to experience through our Gospel Reading what I would like to refer to as “The Ultimate Strike Out.”

I know all too often in our faith experience, or life in general, things always seem to happen in threes. There is indeed some divine intervention with that, as I am certain it is not just some fluke reoccurrence. Regardless of that, we are provided a story here today that is pretty straight forward. It is pretty simple to understand, that is if of course if we do not over dissect it. Which I seem to do pretty well all too often, whether I try to do so or not. So, I got that covered for all of us, don’t you worry about that!

So, “As we begin the Lenten season, our text takes us to the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Right after the Holy Spirit descended upon him, Jesus was led out to the wilderness to inaugurate his earthly ministry with a mighty victory.” (2)

Now, if any of you have the common knowledge of baseball you know it can be a war of attrition. You experience nine long innings of back and forth play, that by the end, can make any person tired, even the most skilled or in shape player or coach. Not to mention, that war of attrition can go on even longer if the two teams happen to be tied. It is I do believe my wife’s least favorite term in sports, overtime, or for the sake of baseball terminology, extra innings.

So, you may be sitting there and asking yourselves, where exactly is Vince going with this. Well, that is a fabulous question indeed! So, let’s set the stage for “The Ultimate Strike Out” here.

Satan indeed believes he is the one dealing the heat here, or the one pitching in the case of baseball terms. However, what he does not realize is that he has stepped up to the plate of God, and Jesus is indeed actually pitching to him. Satan thinks he is in the best position and is the best coach and best player. However, he has fooled himself yet again, he is on another ego trip as some of us might say, and forgets he is going up against the All-Powerful and Almighty Creator. Satan is completely aware of the fact that Jesus has fasted for forty days and forty nights leading up to this game. He perceives Jesus to be just like a player that has gone into extra innings in a tied game, and he expects Jesus to be mentally and physically worn out. However, Jesus is not any ordinary player. He is the ultimate player!

So, Satan steps up to the plate and with all his ego and bravado he swings as hard as he can at the first pitch. We learn that this first pitch is “The first temptation that attacked the provision of the Father. At first glance, it seems that Satan is only asking Jesus to prove that he is God’s Son by making the stone into bread. But, crafty as always, Satan really was implying that Jesus would have to provide food for himself since the Father wasn’t doing it.” (2) One cannot live on bread alone, correct? Jesus had the Word inside of him, and he was full. So, Jesus winds up and delivers the pitch. Then, we get a mighty swing and a miss from Satan here, and the umpire announces, Strike One!

Satan thinks he shakes off the power of that first denial, and he steps back up to the plate again. He believes he is ready to knock pitch number two out of the proverbial park. “The second temptation attacked Jesus’ trust in God’s protection. Satan even uses part of God’s Word to test Jesus the second time. Satan quotes Psalm Ninety-one which speaks of God’s protection for his children. But the fiend implies that Jesus should test God out to see if he really means it. But the Psalm nowhere implies that one put God to the test. In fact, Satan leaves part of verse 11 out, which gives the parameters in which God promises to protect believers. Psalm 91:11 says, “’He will command his angels concerning you in all your ways.” The word “ways” is a word that means the path of life which God has laid out for you. The word talks about your day to day course of life, actions and undertakings.” (2) So, Jesus winds up and delivers the second pitch. A second mighty swing from Satan gets the same result, a miss, and the umpire announces, Strike Two!

Alright, alright, Satan tries to reason with himself and talk himself up, just like many batters do at the plate. Satan says to himself, Jesus might have gotten me on those last two pitches, but I still got one more left. Satan steps back into the proverbial batter’s box and reasons with himself. Satan thinks he can win the game with his last step up to the plate. “Although he was 0 for 2 in his tries to tempt Jesus, Satan wasn’t deterred. Next he took Jesus up a high mountain and there showed him all the nations. He told Jesus everything he saw could be his just by bowing down to him.” (4) “He attempted to offer Christ the easy way out. We aren’t really sure how much of God’s plan of salvation Satan understood, but he did know that Jesus was there to rescue the world. So his offer to give Jesus the kingdoms of the world comes as no surprise.” (2) So, Jesus winds up and delivers the third and final pitch, what a change-up. He completely fools Satan who takes his third and final big swing, and he tries to use all of the might he can muster, and it is the same exact result. A swing and a miss, and the umpire announces, with a ton of swagger Steeeerrrrrriiike Threeeeee! The next announcement from our eternal umpire, our God, is the most profound of them all, you’re out!

“The Ultimate Strike Out” occurred! “Jesus defeated Satan with God’s Word. He rebuffed each temptation with quotes from Scripture. Jesus didn’t use rationalization. Nor was he silent.” (2) “Even when Satan used Scripture, Christ showed that God’s Word interprets itself!” (2) “Jesus maintained that God alone has the right to interpret his Word. Jesus faced Satan and his temptations head on, and still kept God’s Law.” (2)

We learn from today’s Gospel Reading that “Jesus as a human had to learn what it meant to be him, the unique Son and Servant of God. He rejected each temptation to misuse his unique position and powers, even for a good cause. And he used Scripture rightly, all of Scripture, not just what served his preconceived purposes. He clearly wants us to do the same. We can only derive the strength and light that Scripture affords when we approach Scripture properly- as an obedient child and servant.” (3) “The Bible is not a good luck charm that bring us blessings because we have it prominently displayed on the coffee table. Friends, take the time to learn God’s Word and then use it. Don’t think that we study God’s Word here in church as an academic exercise. We study it because it’s useful, no, essential in our daily lives.” (4) So, we get the unique opportunity to deliver “The Ultimate Strike Out” to Satan. We get the unique opportunity to help others see rightly, and realize that despite all the temptation and trickery from Satan they were never not part of this team… this community… this congregation… this church family.

Amen!

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Sunday, February 26, 2023

First Sunday in Lent

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New Revised Standard Version

**Matthew 4:1-11**

Jesus experiences anew the temptations that Israel faced in the wilderness. As the Son of God, he endures the testing of the evil one.

1Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” 4But he answered, “It is written,

 ‘One does not live by bread alone,

  but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ ”

 5Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

 ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’

  and ‘On their hands they will bear you up,

 so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’ ”

7Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ”

 8Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” 10Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

 ‘Worship the Lord your God,

  and serve only him.’ ”

11Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.