

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen

The First Sunday in Lent (2021)

In His Word, I Hope

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“Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said 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, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’ ” Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ”” (Matthew 4:5–7, ESV)

Today is the First Sunday in Lent, a season of prayerful and penitential reflection regarding our lives as Christians, as children of God, and especially on Him who is the object of our faith, Jesus Christ. It is a season when our attention is especially directed to the holy sufferings and death of our Lord Jesus and to our renewal and regeneration in the waters of Baptism, where all our sins were forgiven and where we were rescued from sin, death, and the devil, so that in times of doubt, temptation, or failure, and especially in the face of death, we can boldly say, “I am baptized into Christ.” Because we are recipients of this blessed Sacrament, we can, with certainty, take great comfort in the words of St. Paul, ***“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 8:1, ESV)*** So, yes, Lent leads us to prayerful and penitential reflection on our lives as children of God, especially on those times when we fall prey to temptation and put (***“the Lord [our] God to the test.” (Matthew 4:7, ESV)***)

As we reflect on the gracious mercy of God who called us and cleansed us in the waters of Baptism, we begin by reminding ourselves from where we came. The Old Testament Reading reminds us that we were created in God’s image (Gen. 1:27), filled with God’s original righteousness. At that time man walked with God and shared in God’s goodness and holiness. God’s thoughts were his thoughts, and God’s will, was his will. At that time man was in perfect harmony with God. But that righteousness was lost because man fell prey to and surrendered to the temptations of the devil. Satan seduced Adam and Eve, tempting them to believe that if they ate of the fruit of the tree from which they were commanded not to eat, they would become like God, knowing good and evil (Gen. 3:5). Satan tempted Adam and Eve to reject, to turn away from God’s Word. These two who were in perfect harmony with God, fell prey to the lies of Satan and to their fleshly desire, and thus lost that perfect image with which they were created. Furthermore, their sin brought death into a world that was not intended for death. Having fallen into sin, bringing death upon the earth, God said to Adam, ***“By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:19, ESV)*** Words we are reminded of on Ash Wednesday.

So, we begin the Lenten season with this first and foremost on our mind; man, who was created in the image of God lost that image with his fall in the garden, and now all who are his descendants are born without the fullness of this blessed image. Now man is born with only a tiny remnant of God’s Righteousness, His Law, which was once written on the heart of Adam and continues to be written on the hearts of men. Here we have what is left of the general image of God after the fall. But this tiny remnant is not enough for man to fully know God. Regarding the hearts of worldly men, St. Paul says, ***“For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the***

immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.” (Romans 1:21–23, ESV) Man today is still under the tempting spell of Satan, knowing God without knowing His Word.

These words of St. Paul show us the faulty reason of man after the fall, a reason so faulty that we are unable, on our own, to come to God. He must come to us. Moreover, against the old evil foe, we have no defense. Again, St. Paul tells us, ***“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:12, ESV)*** Our defense is always and only the Word of God. Our Lord Jesus tells us if we want to live to the fullest, we must, ***“not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matthew 4:4, ESV)***

In God’s Word, we have hope, but the Old Testament and Gospel Readings for today show us that Satan is no respecter of God’s Word, attacking even the Son of God, tempting Him to sin. Satan, foolishly believed that since the Son of God had assumed the flesh of man, He would be as pliable as man. He thought that since Christ would be hungry, tired, exhausted, after having fasted for forty days and night, He would also be vulnerable. So, as he did to Eve in the garden, Satan comes to Jesus not offering sustenance, but temptation, tempting Jesus as he did Eve in the garden by raising the specter of doubt, asking, ***“if you are the Son of God?” (Gen. 3:3, 5)*** If so, prove it. Command these stones to become bread so You can satisfy Your hunger. Fear not, throw Yourself off the temple, God’s angels will save You if You are the Son of God. It is not Satan asking, ***“did God actually say” (Gen. 3:1, ESV)***, but asking, “are You who You claim to be?” When this line of attack fails, Satan then offers what is not his, He offers Jesus the world if He would but worship him rather than God.

With each and every temptation, Jesus rejects Satan by responding with God’s Word; ***“It is written, “‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ ” “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ” and finally, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, “ ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’ ” (Matthew 4:4, 7, 10, ESV)***

If this old ancient foe has no fear of God, then you can be assured he has no fear of you as a child of God. In fact, you can be assured that he hates you and his goal is to enslave you for all eternity in hell. He seeks to accomplish this through subtle and not so subtle temptations, appealing to your fleshly desires. Satan sees you as he thought he saw Jesus, vulnerable. But unlike Jesus, in your case, he sees you as you are; a frail, weak human who is a saint and sinner simultaneously. Truth is, life is filled with challenges, some of them quite vexing. Again and again, Satan, the father of lies, through the world and your flesh, attacks you and tempts you to fall away from the One who gave His life for yours. His greatest hope is that you will think that you can rely on yourself, your strength, your wisdom, and your cunning to protect you, but you dare not. If you rely on yourself, you are opening the door to his attacks and committing spiritual suicide.

In his lectures on Galatians, the sainted Dr. Luther said, when speaking of Christians praying against temptation, ***“Therefore I admonish you, especially those of you who are to become instructors of consciences, as well as each of you individually, that you exercise yourselves by study, by reading, by meditation, and by prayer, so that in temptation you will be able to instruct consciences, both your own and others, console them, and take them from the Law to grace, from active righteousness to passive righteousness, in short, from Moses to Christ. In affliction and in the conflict of conscience it is the devil’s habit to frighten us with the Law and to set against us the consciousness of sin, our wicked past, the wrath and judgment of God, hell, and eternal***

death, so that thus he may drive us into despair, subject us to himself, and pluck us from Christ.” Wise and prudent words. Words which every Christian should heed.

Satan is relentless, he never stops. It matters not that you have been Baptized, there is but one defense against Satan, and that is God’s Word, *that Word in which we Hope.*

Sadly, there are so many who think they can withstand the temptations of Satan on their own. That somehow, they have what it takes to defeat him. But, again, nothing could be further from the truth. Do we not pray in the Sixth Petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, **“And lead us not into temptation,”** (*Matthew 6:13, ESV*) and do we not believe, teach, and confess that God tempts no one, but we pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice? Furthermore, do we not pray that when we are attacked by these things, that we may finally overcome them and win the victory. Yes, this is what we believe, teach, and confess.

Listening to God’s Word, we learn that on His last night with His apostles, Jesus said, **“Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”** (*Matthew 26:41, ESV*) Here Jesus reminds us that we should constantly be on our guard not to enter temptation. We must constantly be on our guard against the weakness of our flesh. It is filled with desires contrary to God’s will. Moreover, it is urged on by the world and Satan. However, we are also reminded that, **“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”** (*1 Corinthians 10:13, ESV*)

This is true, there is no new temptation. As long as man has walked the earth, Satan has been tempting him to sin. For the unbeliever this is catastrophic, but for the Christian this can work for good. St. Paul told us, **“we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”** (*Romans 8:28, ESV*) All things, this includes temptation. Satan’s temptation to sin can actually embolden the Christian to detest not just the temptations but the sin that occurs through them. Thus, temptation can become a servant when the Christian resist it, producing a loathing of iniquity and a love of righteousness. But to defeat Satan and his temptations, the Christian must fortify themselves through reading and the study of God’s Word, through meditation on that Word, and through prayer. These are disciplines of Lent. Lent focuses your attention on these Spirit led disciplines, but as a believer in Christ Jesus, you should live everyday of your life with these disciplines first and foremost on your heart and mind.

In His Word, we Hope, without it we despair. However, Satan never ceases to tempt. St. Peter encourages us to; **“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour”** (*1 Peter 5:8 ESV*). But you have been given strength to protect yourself against this lion. Your old nature was reborn in those blessed waters of Baptism and you were given the gift of faith to believe in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Through those blessed waters the Holy Spirit renewed and regenerated you, making you a new man, one whose nature has been changed from an enemy of God to a child of God. Yours is a nature that is closer to that with which Adam was created. Now you desire to wait, hope, trust, and believe in God. You desire **“not [to] live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God,”** in the sure and certain hope of obtaining the victory won for you by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, on the Altar of the Cross, the forgiveness of your sins and life eternal in heaven. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.