

Sermon Lent 1 2020

March 1, 2020

Matthew 4:1-11

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson, previously read, the temptation of our Lord Jesus.

In the Exodus of the Israelites, they were captive to Pharaoh. The Lord freed them from that captivity by Moses. They went through the waters of the Red Sea, and they finally ended up in the wilderness. Of course, if you know the story, you remember that time and time again they are tested in the wilderness and they fall short. There is the Golden Calf, there is the grumbling and the serpents who come as a consequence, there is Korah's rebellion. Then finally there's the sending of the spies. As the spies go and scope out the Promised Land, they come back and 10 of the twelve don't trust that the Lord could carry them into the Land safely. The people jump on that, and their rejection of the promises of God result in God preventing them from entering that land for forty years.

With that in mind, where do we see Jesus in the Gospel Lesson this morning? He's doing what they couldn't do. He's out in the wilderness being tempted. It seems impossible not to make a connection there. All the more look at timing. Just before this in Matthew chapter 3 John baptized Jesus. Then we heard how the Spirit led Him out there to the wilderness. It's similar to how Israel was baptized in Red Sea then went wandering there. For them forty years, for Jesus forty days and forty nights.

Of course, this contrast should be encouraging for us as well. I'm guessing you've heard me say this before, but when we think of Israel in the wilderness, I think we should see a direct analogy for the life of a Christian. I said this about Israel being baptized in the Red Sea, I didn't make that up, Paul says that in 1 Corinthians 10. And look at what we see, they're baptized, they're wandering in the desert. They're tempted, they're put in trials. They're constantly attacked spiritually. But what else do you see? They're cared for by the Lord. He feeds them with manna—just as He feeds us, His baptized people with His Holy Supper. He cares for them, and promises that they will not be overcome. Their clothes will not tatter, and their shoes will not wear through. However, despite this care, what did we just hear was the result for the Israelites? They fell short. And the same is true for us.

But that's where this work of Jesus is so comforting. Where Israel fell short, Jesus didn't. Where we fall short, Jesus didn't. What comfort. What a blessing to see that our

Heavenly Father continues to give to us generously without any merit or worthiness in us.

In fact, I love how we can see this even back to the Fall as we read in Genesis Three. Those of you who have taken my Adult Class have heard me speak about this. There is so much theology packed into these 24 verses of this chapter, it's amazing. Unfortunately, today isn't the day to unpack all of that. I do want to point out something that's especially comforting, though. That's God's provision here.

You've heard the story a thousand times, I'm sure, but think about in some of its details. Here Eve is standing at the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the serpent comes and tempts her. And she succumbs and eats. So does her husband, who fails in his role to guard and protect her, and eats as well. And then what do they do? First, they realize they're naked, so they make clothes for themselves out of fig leaves. And this is interesting, because I've heard that fig leaves are quite coarse, as though they're intentionally making themselves less comfortable, sort of intending to atone for their wrong-doing. But then what happens? God comes, and what do they do? They run and they hide.

But what does God do for them? Well, first He finds them, but ultimately, He clothes them. And how? With animal skins. How must those skins have been obtained? He must have killed the animals to get their skins. And as I say that, think about all of this. What was supposed to have happened when Adam and Eve sinned? They were supposed to have died. Instead, the animals did. And what have we not seen before this in the Bible? We haven't seen death. We've seen life, we've seen goodness, we've seen the goodness of creation, but not death. No, the first death occurs here because man has sinned, and yet who provides the life to be sacrificed? God does. In fact, as He does that, then He covers over Adam and Eve with something better. He provides them with the animal skins. And as I say that, think of the coarseness of a leaf versus a well-tanned animal skin. Which is better? By far the animal skin, right? And I imagine God can tan an animal skin far better than any human tanner can. And so we see God's provision.

But as we see this, we see it grounded in a promise: The Lord said to the serpent... **"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."** Now if you aren't familiar with this, the Church has understood this as a promise for the coming Messiah, for Jesus; the Offspring of Woman, who would come and crush the head of the serpent.

And that's a part of what we see happening in the Gospel Lesson: Jesus the One crushing the head of the serpent. Here the serpent seeks to lead this Christ astray, this One named, pointed out to be God's Son in His baptism—"This is my beloved Son, with

Him I am well pleased,” and the serpent tempts this Son, and says “Prove it!” Now on the one hand we can see the way this One proves His Sonship precisely by not giving in to temptation. But we can also see how He does it. He doesn’t rely on showing those who would put other demands on Him. He does not rely on the approval of those who would like to say “This is what God in the flesh would look like,” or “That’s what God in the flesh would look like.” No instead, He relies on the Word of the One Who called Him Son. He trusts this God who has spoken to Him in His baptism. He wields the sword of that Word in defense, and overcomes the evil one. And to be clear, as I say this, you hopefully see that what Jesus does in His defense against the devil is to quote Scripture back to him. As the devil confronts Him, Jesus responds with quotes from the Scriptures each time. And in that we have the provision of God, the promise being fulfilled.

Of course the fullness of that promise is seen, then, in the cross upon which this Seed of the Woman finally crushed the head of the serpent. As He gave up His life there, He was finally the sacrifice which would cover over sin for all time. Yes at the Fall, God had provided the animals, in the Old Testament God had provided the animals, but on the cross is the real substitution, the One Who was worthy to give His life as a ransom for many because He hadn’t given in to temptation. There on Calvary, the One Who was able to stand in for you because He stood firm where you haven’t in temptation. God’s provision for you. What a blessing!

As we hear that then, we say, “Thanks be to God! But what do I do now when I am tempted?” After all, this is a real concern for us as Christians, isn’t it? Shouldn’t we be worried about that? If you’re like me when you wake up in the morning, you’d like to hope that you’ll be faithful in that day. But then temptations arise. Sometimes that temptation is to just keep sleeping. But throughout our day, temptations arise, and by God’s grace, having been born anew in baptism, we glide past many of them. And then there are those that we stop and consider. And as I say that, as your pastor, I exhort you, when you get to that fork in the road between sinning and not sinning, run down that road that is not sinning. Flee as far from you can from that temptation. Like our Lord, wield the sword of His Word against the serpent and tell him to get away.

But that said, we all know that we have those temptations that we fall into over and over again. They might be ones we could flee from with no trouble, or ones that are unavoidable, but we fall into them again and again. And what do we do there?

I’ve mentioned this book that I’ve been reading about being a pastor, and there’s a great point that the author makes in there. He tells the story of a man that he pastored during his tenure in a congregation. He calls the man Ned. Ned was apparently someone whom you would see and think he was friendly enough on the surface, but it

quickly became apparent that there were some deep emotional scars. Ned's father had been an abusive alcoholic, incapable of loving his children, and who had blamed Ned's mother for his unhappiness. As I always say how the sins of others taint us, Ned knew this. He himself had been to treatment for his alcoholism numerous times. Likewise, he struggled with solitary sexual sins habitually. You see, Ned knew this tainting of his conscience left by his father, and these sins gave him a way to take his mind off of that pain, to numb himself. Of course, the problem was that the constant giving into temptation left Ned feeling that much more pained, left his conscience feeling that much more burdened. So what did he need? He needed treatment in the purification of his conscience. How could he get that? Through the blood of Jesus, and the blood of Jesus alone. The pastor who wrote this book made the point that Ned's treatment for his addictions and his pain was forgiveness. He needed to hear that when he was baptized, Jesus had washed all of this away. When the devil tried to drag Ned's nose in it, he needed to hear that this blood was still cleansing him in the Lord's Supper, that the word of absolution returned Ned to that purity. In other words, what needed was to be close to Jesus.

You see, as I always make that point that Jesus comes to us here in His Word, in baptism, in the Supper of His body and blood, that's our help in temptation. When we come near to this Lord who stood up to temptation, His blood, His holiness makes us holy in Him. As I tell the confirmation kids, through the Word and through the sacraments, Jesus "holifies" us. He sanctifies us, makes us holy in Him. And that's our strength in every trial and tribulation.

Sometimes this is hard. I know there are those times when it's hard to pray, because we think God certainly wouldn't even want to hear our prayers because of our sin. But He does. He wants us to draw near. Think again about what it says in the Epistle lesson, **"we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."** Draw near then to that throne of grace, He brings it to you in His Word, in His body and blood. Draw near as He brings His cross to you to make you holy in temptation.

Yes, Christian, Jesus is God's good provision for you. He is your substitution, the One faithful in the wilderness as you are not, faithful as Israel was not either. But because He is faithful, He will be faithful to you in your trials. Come near to Him and be holy in Him. He promises this care for you in His grace, even in your temptations. Amen.