

1st Sunday in Lent – Year B – February 26, 2012 – Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY
Based on Mark 1:12-15 written by Pastor Paul Horn

The reality of temptation

- I. **For Jesus**
- II. **For us**

He wanders aimlessly, staggering around shrubs and bushes, careful to avoid the snakes sunning themselves on the rocky ledges, but most of the time he doesn't even notice them he's so tired. The rock and sand under his feet radiate the heat from the sun beating down on him. His neck and hands blistered from its rays. His lips are chapped. His mouth is parched. Is that a grove of trees in the distance? Could that be the sound of a creek? No. It is not. How long has it been? Two... maybe three weeks, then again, maybe only three days. It's hard to tell, he's growing delirious...

Some of you have hiked through desolate and dangerous landscapes. Usually not alone, and not without provisions of some kind. It's hard to imagine what Jesus went through, 40 days and 40 nights, all by himself... 40 days and nights is a long time to go without food. It is physically possible for a human being to endure that kind of torture, but it's also true that after 40 days with no food and no human contact, the mind starts to go and desperation sets in. The temptation to use his divinity to transform stones into bread would be great. In our lesson Mark also tells us that Jesus was with the wild animals. The region Jesus most likely spent his time in was infested with snakes, hyenas, wolves, lions, leopards and foxes. That's a little bit frightening, especially when you're all by yourself, with no shotgun slung around your shoulder to keep company.

A common misconception in this story is that Jesus was only tempted three times by Satan in the wilderness, because Matthew's record of this story gives us three distinct temptations. Mark tells us he was being tempted the entire time. Over a month of being constantly trapped by Satan, continually questioned, persistence in raising doubts, can make one's spirit weak. We can only imagine the questions Satan raised to Jesus, "Are you sure you want to do this, I'm going to make your life hell the next three years. Are these people worth it? You know that most of them won't benefit from your work anyway. Why go through all of this? You can't do this. You'll fail."

He Jesus, was true God, but he was also a man, and as man he had only 30 years experience dealing with Satan. He had very little experience in warfare. Satan on the other hand was experienced in the art of reconnaissance, battle planning and execution. While we give credit to our Army Cav Scouts and all their years of training to be the most excellent Soldiers in the world, it doesn't even compare to Satan. Satan has had thousands of years of watching the human race, (spying on God's children especially), gathering intel so that he knows exactly which carrot he may dangle before our eyes to try and draw us into the trap of sin. He watched the Christ for 30 years, waiting for the opportunity to try and lure him into the deathtrap of sin. Yes, he is a mighty, powerful foe, cunning and sly.

Some people try to downplay the reality of the temptations. They argue that because Jesus was God the temptations could not be brought to him or that temptations were an easy matter to him, or that they danced off him as easily as rain drops off the back of a duck. The author of the book of Hebrews testifies to the reality of these temptations, "**He was tempted in all points just as we are.**" Every temptation we experience, Jesus did. And I believe more than that, because he was God's Son. Satan could use that angle and he did push Jesus on that, "Since you are the Son of God... do this." Yes, Jesus had a bitter fight.

What was different about Jesus' temptations was that they were from the outside. He did not have an inner sinful nature enticing him to take the bait – as we do. Still, the temptations were real for Jesus. He had to struggle against them just the same.

During our Ash Wednesday service last week, we listened to Judas Iscariot explain the struggle with the inner sinful self and the attacks from Satan on the outside. Temptations are a reality for us, too. How seriously do you take temptations? Do you realize that Satan tempts you every day for the sole purpose of causing you to fall away from faith in Jesus? Since that is true, we need to be aware of the traps Satan sets for you. He has been watching you closely - the places you go, the friends you hang with, the time you spend at work or at home, he listens to the conversations you have, he takes note of the places you let your eyes wander - and he then draws up a plan and waits for the right time to set his trap. Are you aware that this happens every single day? Every single day of your life Satan sets a trap designed especially for you. And he's very good – again, he's had several thousand years of experience in guerrilla warfare.

Yes, Satan is unconventional. He doesn't come right out and say, "Here's something sinful to do!" He's sly and cunning. He often poses a question, "Wouldn't you rather be doing this than that?" And the one option he proposes looks appealing. Sometimes it doesn't even seem that bad. Satan is using the same tricks he used on Adam and Eve in the Garden, "Did God really say you have to do this? Did he really say that you have to obey everything he's commanded? 'Cause that's really hard to do! I'm sure he won't mind if you do this one time. He's not that serious about sin anyway."

What is it for you? You probably already know which area of your life Satan has a grasp on. And if you don't, it wouldn't take that long to figure out if we read through the commandments. But that could take a while. So this morning we will summarize by using one word, "Priorities." Where does God want your priorities to be? To him and to his Word - in all things, in every situation. What is most important to you in your life right now? Besides work or school what occupies the majority of your time? When you daydream, what is it that you often daydream about? Are your priorities what you make them to be, or is your life prioritized by God and his Word?

What do you love so much that it would be impossible to willingly and gladly give up if the Lord required it? Would you give up your son? Abraham got up early and went straight ahead to obey. Would you? When God required you to give something up - some time, a friend, a girlfriend or boyfriend, some popularity among your friends, some money - out of love and loyalty to his Word, did you do it? Did you do it gladly and willingly? If God would take away house and home, wealth and position, all that you are and have, would you complain about it? If you do not love God enough to give up your son or daughter for him, why should he give up his Son for you?

But that's what he did. He gave his Son, his only son, whom he loves so much, for you! Remember that at age 30, Jesus went to the Jordan River to be baptized by John the Baptist. There his Father in heaven declared him fit and acceptable to carry out his plan of salvation. So urgent was your salvation, so eager was he to win your salvation, that immediately after his baptism, the Holy Spirit led Jesus out into the desert to begin that work, which began with a battle against Satan, so that he might experience everything that you and I would face in temptation, but that he might win, so that he might be victorious for us. And he did.

The writer to Hebrews reminds us, "**For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin.**" (Hebrews 4.15) Jesus struggled with temptation and had to fight them off, but he did not fall, not once! As our substitute, Jesus willingly went with the Holy Spirit into the desert – and with perfect obedience, all by himself, faced off with Satan. He allowed Satan to set his traps, but always sidestepped those landmines. He

willingly made his Father and his Word THE priority in his life. He wasn't at all concerned if his devotion to God would mar his popularity or hinder his income or social status or ruin relationships with his friends. Devotion to the Word of God was most important. And so by his life of obedience to God and his Word he emerged from the desert as a battle weary soldier, but victorious.

As soon as he walks from that field of battle, only to step into another, Jesus' message is urgent. He says, **"Repent and believe the good news!"** (Mark 1.15) He knows how real the temptations are. He knows that Satan will stop at nothing to get you to fall away from faith. He's experienced it. So his message to you is urgent, **"Repent and believe the good news!"** Yes, today we are painfully aware that too often we have fallen into Satan's traps. Too often we have made other things in our lives more important than God and his Word. But today is the beginning of Lent. Today we renew the battle against Satan as we hear Jesus' call - and today we repent! Today we acknowledge our old sinful ways. Today we turn from our old sinful ways and today we turn to Jesus and believe. We put our trust in his good news! His good news is this: that through faith in Jesus, He has given us his holy life. Through trust in him, Jesus' life of obedience and perfect faith is ours. Believe it and it is yours! Believe it, and God will see you as he sees his Son – perfect and holy and without sin.

Believe also the Words of God that we heard this morning from the Apostle Paul, **"Since God is for us, who can be against us?"** Even Satan and all the demons of hell rushing at us every day, our sinful nature, this sinful world, even death? They may try, but we are more than conquerors through Jesus, Paul says. Through faith in Christ, his victory is our victory over Satan. We've already won the battle.

Satan knows this, that he has lost, but he tries again and again to make us lose heart as we march on toward heaven. Some days, most days, it feels like I'm walking through the desert, all by myself, just me and Satan. Jesus knows this, and as the writer to the Hebrews said, **"He is able to sympathize with us in our weakness."** He will not leave us alone in this battle against evil. He knows how to win in a fight with the devil. He gives us the same weapons to defeat Satan. We just sang in our hymn, "Scowl fierce as he will, he can harm us none - he's judged the deed is done. One little word can fell him." (*A Mighty Fortress is our God – Christian Worship* 201:3) Jesus is that word – and we can say, "Satan, Jesus has won for me! He has made me the victor!"

At the time of Lent, people often ask, "Do you Lutherans give stuff up for Lent?" My first question to them is, "Why do people give stuff up for Lent?" As long as we do it for the right reasons - giving up a sinful habit to say thanks to Jesus for his sacrifice for us... What if this Lent we gave something up and took something up at the same time? What if we gave up a "time waster" on our calendar to take up something - the study of God's Word. How about that? What if today we take something up for Lent, take up the Word of God every day, so that through it we may repent of our sins, and ready ourselves to face the reality of temptation, and with the Word of God as our sword in battle know that we have already won.

To God alone be the glory! Amen!