

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
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The First Sunday in Lent
February 10, 2008
Matthew 4:1-11

“The Victory Over the Devil”
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

Those are stirring words we just sang. It is very fitting that the Hymn of the Day for this first Sunday in Lent should be Martin Luther’s great battle hymn of the Reformation that speaks so strikingly of the wiles and power of the devil: “The old evil foe now means deadly woe, deep guile and great might are his dread arms in fight. On earth is not his equal. ... Though devils all the world should fill all eager to devour us ...” There can be no doubt that Martin Luther was convinced of the reality of the devil. Indeed, tourists in Germany to this day are shown the room in the Wartburg Castle where Luther supposedly threw his inkwell at the devil in a moment of spiritual testing. I have been privileged to be in that room myself on one of my tours to Germany. For years the ink spot was periodically renewed, but it is interesting that the tourists to that room over the centuries have so thoroughly chipped away pieces of wood from that wall that where the ink spot was there is now just a hole in the wall! Our more sophisticated age may often laugh at the reality of the devil though the violence and death often experienced are grim reminders that evil still has power in the world. There are also far too many who exhibit a morbid fascination with the works of the devil as films and stories about the occult are very popular. With this background this morning we will look at a temptation which was very real, very cunning, and was also undertaken in our place. The Gospel lesson for this day will lead us to see the temptation of Jesus under the theme: “The Victory over the Devil.”

I. The Temptation Account

The temptations of Jesus related in the text this morning take place after Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Spirit and has fasted for 40 days and nights. It was during this time the Gospels indicate that he was also tempted by the devil. The forty day duration of this fast is suggestive to us of the length of Lent--40 days. (Ash Wednesday reminder) As we have entered once again into the Lenten season of preparation we are reminded of Jesus' preparation for his ministry which began with His temptation. The first temptation of the devil followed directly from Jesus' hunger. "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." What a simple thing for Jesus to do. He who had made all things could very simply have made bread from stones. But to do so would have been to place himself outside of the will and care of His Father in heaven. And so he answers with a word of Scripture: "It is written, 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

So Satan took Jesus to the top of the temple, to the highest point and said, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written, 'He will command his angels

concerning you and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." The first temptation was to walk outside of the will of God, the second was to test the faithfulness of God to his word by forcing an action. And the devil even had a word of Scripture to use to supposedly prove the point. Again Jesus replied, "It is also written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" You are not to walk carelessly or dangerously in the hope that God will care for you. And so now there was only one attack left.

The devil takes Jesus to a mountaintop and shows him all the kingdoms and glory of the world. He says, "All this I will give you, if you will bow down and worship me." What a brazen attack this is. And yet very cunning as well. As we sang before, "The old evil foe, now means deadly woe, deep guile and great might, are his dread arms in fight, on earth is not his equal." For here Satan offers Jesus the kingdom without the cross. Here is a shortcut to glory and power. But at the same time how foolish! For here the usurper of the kingdoms of the world is offering them to the true King. And if these things are truly his to offer, then who really is the ruler of this age? But Jesus sees through the folly of this temptation and banishes the evil one, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" And as the text concludes, "the devil left Him, and angels came and attended Him." Jesus stood up to the test. And the angels of God who did not come to rescue him from a foolhardy leap from the temple, come now to rejoice with Him and minister to his needs. Jesus truly was tempted for us.

II. The Reality of Temptation Today

What does this account have to say to the temptations of this age? There are many possibilities. But there are two that I would like to make based upon the temptation of Jesus. The first is more obvious and quite frightening. How many today are hearing the words of the Tempter, "Fall down and worship me." We hear whispers of it. We read accounts of the rise of devil worship. The evil things done in the name of the devil in the world around us are not always so secret anymore. We should be reminded as St. Peter says, that the devil is a roaring lion walking about seeking whom he may devour. And he continues to devour the souls of many who are deceived by his lies and treachery.

But the second application may not be quite as obvious but it is the one that holds the greatest threat to the church and to the people of God. For how often today, is the devil not asking questions that begin with words very similar to those he used with Jesus, "If you are the Son of God..." or rather, "If he is the Son of God." Indeed this is the great crossroads that stands before the church and before each of us as we face the alluring voices of the other religions of the world. The question really is, "Is He the Son of God?" The Islamic religion most strongly denies it. In the Koran it is written, "Warn those who say, 'God has taken to Himself a son'; ... a monstrous word it is, issuing out of their mouths; they say nothing but a lie." And again, the Koran says, "They do blaspheme who say, 'God is Christ the son of Mary.' ... Christ the Son of Mary was no more than an apostle." No matter how often you

have heard it said in recent years, the God of Islam is not the same as the God we worship. For if it were the case, we would of necessity have to deny the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But it is not just the Muslims who teach this. The Mormons, the Jehovah's Witnesses and other groups as well would deny the divinity and Sonship of Jesus Christ. Or they would say he is "a" son just like we can be. The devil has been very successful in promoting this heresy through the years and he has even succeeded in enlisting the assistance of so-called Christian theologians who would deny the Lord Jesus as well.

"Is he the Son of God?" They are words that have a very ancient foundation, for they go back to the Garden of Eden and the words of the serpent, "Did God really say?" Among pious believers, what more insidious and effective attack could there be than to raise doubts about Jesus as the Son of God. Oh yes, speak of him as a good teacher, a moral leader, a freedom fighter. But not as the Son of God and Savior. What foolish words are spoken and repeated so often as words of intelligence and learning. How often tragically they are even proclaimed from pulpits and taught in Bible classes. But they are nothing but the words of the devil.

III. The Victory for Us

And what is our answer to these things? It is so simple. It is the answer of Jesus to each of His temptations, "IT IS WRITTEN!" This is the Greek word: "Gegraptai" It stands written. It has been written and nothing can change it. The Word of the Lord is our strength. How foolish the many words of the scholars are or the teachings of the false religions of the world when you open the Gospels and read. For the only way you can reach conclusions like those I quoted just before is to deny and ignore what has been written. How foolish the temptations of the devil are when you grasp hold of the word of the Lord. And that word truly tells us of Jesus--Without doubt, without equivocation, with all truth and power. It reminds us who we are and it reminds us of the victory. We sang it before: "With might of ours can naught be done soon were our loss effected." We cannot rely on our own strength. Indeed as St. Paul tells us in the epistle for today, we are descendants of Adam our father. We are dead in his sins and our own sins. We cannot depend upon ourselves. Our own flesh is at war against us. Thank God we also sang: "But for us fights the Valiant One, whom God Himself Elected." Yes indeed, see His victory over the devil, not just in those encounters in the wilderness, and at the temple, and on a high mountain, but see his victory on another hill outside of Jerusalem upon a cross. Here his cry of triumph, "It is finished." There is our hope and salvation. That is the journey we again begin this Lenten season as we go to Calvary. For as we sang, "Ask ye, who is this, Jesus Christ it is, of Sabaoth Lord, and there's none other God, he holds the field forever." There can be no doubt who has won the victory for us. He is the Lord of hosts himself. The God of heavenly armies, the victor over the devil is Jesus Christ our Lord. And in him as we say as part of our baptismal service, "We renounce the devil and all his works and all his ways." What a victory indeed! The victory is his. The victory is ours. The victory is assured in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Though devils all the world should fill
All eager to devour us
We tremble not we fear no ill
They shall not overpower us
This world's prince may still
Scowl fierce as he will
He can harm us none
He's judged, the deed is done.
One little word can fell him.

One little word indeed! GEGRAPTA! It is written.
In Jesus' Name. Amen.