

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
5327 W. Washington Blvd.
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

First Sunday in Lent
March 1, 2009
James 1:12-18

A Sermon for National Lutheran Schools Sunday

“Brought Forth by the Word of Truth”

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

This Sunday as in many other Missouri Synod congregations, we are observing National Lutheran Schools Sunday at the beginning of National Lutheran Schools Week. Our day school faculty and students have a full week of activities planned (as you can see from the back of the bulletin cover). At the 8:30 service we have been (will be – were) privileged to have the participation of the day school children in our service. This is a good time to remember the blessing that our day school remains to our congregation and to our community. In fact, this weekend we have four baptisms of children from families associated with our school. Indeed, three of the children are students in our Christian Day School. We are also mindful of the need for support for our educational program. About 75% of our operating funds goes to the programs of the school. The Olive Branch program provides a wonderful opportunity for us to help with the educational expenses of families in our community and in our own congregation who wish to send their children to our school yet need financial assistance to do so. So there are challenges that face us as well as many blessings.

Of course, at the same time, this is the First Sunday in Lent and the Scripture lessons for today would really not seem to fit our other emphasis. For the readings talk about temptation and testing, about overcoming the same, and triumph in the promises of God. But there indeed is a connection between the theme of these lessons and our mission and emphasis on Lutheran schools in general and our Christian Day School in particular. In fact the closing verse of the epistle for this day serves as the basis for our theme: Brought Forth by the Word of Truth.

I. Testing and Temptation.

In the first place from our readings we see that the Scripture makes a close connection between testing and temptation though they are different things. We pray in the Lord's Prayer: "And lead us not into temptation." The Small Catechism of Martin Luther explains this petition this way: "God tempts no one. 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. Although we are attacked by these things, we pray that we may finally overcome them and obtain the victory." God indeed tempts no one. In fact that is a quote from the epistle lesson: Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God", for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. No rather temptation comes from the evil desire and sinful nature (the devil, the world, and our own flesh, as we would say) that surrounds us. Think of how that

is true of our children and then what a blessing it is to have a place like a Christian school. Oh, there are temptations there as well. In fact, the devil probably works overtime with them. But at the same time the word of the Lord is present as a constant reminder of the victory over temptation and that word brings us forth by the word of truth.

In the Gospel lesson for today we have the shortest account of the temptation of Jesus in the Gospel accounts. St. Mark writes: "At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him." While Mark does not specifically mention the three temptations which Matthew and Luke mention, he does clearly indicate that the Lord Jesus was tempted during the forty days in the wilderness and he overcame the tempter as angels attended Him. From the other Gospels we know that the Lord used His word to vanquish the temptations of the adversary. We here see the reality of temptation, the reality of the devil and the fact that he roams about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. But we also see the power of the word of God which can vanquish the devil himself.

In the Old Testament lesson we have the account of Abraham's test by the Lord. He is asked to sacrifice his son Isaac. Now this is quite a test. What is remarkable in the account is that Abraham's obedience to the Lord's command is total. He follows through on the instructions. Even the heartbreaking question asked by Isaac, "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering" is answered by Abraham in faith. "God himself will provide the lamb," is Abraham's response. Though the test is very difficult, Abraham perseveres and the Lord at the very last moment stays his hand and provides a ram for the sacrifice. And of course, we are mindful of the fact that Abraham and Isaac were upon the slopes Mount Moriah, where in future years the temple of Jerusalem would stand and the Lord indeed would upon that mount provide the lamb—the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Now the very fact that this lesson is paired with the Gospel of Jesus' temptation is a good reminder that while God does not tempt us, he may test us again and again. He may even permit temptations and trials to come our way to test us. But the word of our God also teaches that the Lord gives us the power to resist temptation. Indeed as St. Paul writes, "God is faithful and he will not let you be tempted beyond that which you are able to bear, but with the temptation will provide a way of escape that you may be able to endure it." (1 Cor. 10:13)

II. Brought Forth

And of course, the Epistle in its closing verses reminds us who we are. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. These words remind us of the source of all things and the source of our being. He who is the creator of all things has made us as well. And then "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures." We are brought forth by him. Now we can consider this the new

birth which is ours in Christ Jesus. We have been born again by the living and eternal word of God. We are new creatures, washed thoroughly and forgiven in his blood by water and the word. All those images, all those pictures are present in these words. We are brought forth by him.

In the coming weeks of Lent, we continue our journey with our Lord Jesus Christ, who conquered the devil for us. We walk with him in faith to the cross where he sacrificed himself for us. We are confident of the victory over sin, death and the devil which he won for us. And that is the precious message that our children should know and learn, from their parents, from their church and from their school. What a blessing that we have the opportunity to share that message in our Christian Day School. As Lutheran Schools Week begins, let us recommit ourselves to our support by prayer and by our gifts that the Lord would continue to use the Christian education provided in this place as a means for his precious ones to hear the word of truth and to be brought forth in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And so we would pray, remembering young Isaac's request to his father Abraham:

The Lamb, the lamb,
O Father, where's the sacrifice?
Faith sees, believes,
God will provide the lamb of price
Worthy is the Lamb,
whose death makes me his own.
The Lamb is reigning on his throne.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.