

1.18.2018 Lent 1 (Matthew 4:1-11)

In his inspired letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul tells Christians to “*put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places*” (Ephesians 6:11-12). On this first Sunday in Lent, as we fix our hearts and minds on a path that leads to the death of the Son of God on a Cross at Calvary, our Gospel reading paints a vivid picture reminding us of the truth that our real fight is not against human enemies, or our corrupt human nature alone. The battle that we are engaged in is against an unearthly power of evil, and an enemy that has a thousand seductive ways to tempt us. In this war with the spiritual forces of evil, whose goal is to sever our communion with God, expect no sympathy or compassion from our enemy, for he will give no quarter, and there will be no truce in the war for human souls.

The Gospel passage that we read this morning describes God leading His only-begotten Son into the wilderness to fast and pray for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards “*to be tempted of the devil*” (Matthew 4:1). This account of the Son of God and the devil in a face-to-face confrontation in the desert is a sobering reminder of the power that our enemy maintains in this world. The battle that these verses describe is not a fight that we could have won. The devil is powerful. As Martin Luther stated in our processional hymn: “On earth is not his equal.” We heard about the way that he was able to take Jesus into the holy city, and set Him on a pinnacle of the Temple (Matthew 4:5), as well as the way that he was able to take Him “*up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth Him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them*” (Matthew 4:8). We know from history, and from personal experience, that facing the fiery darts of our enemy is not easy, and in some ways he even appears to have an advantage. He can’t get tired, while we can and do. He knows our every weakness, while we fail to understand or even acknowledge them ourselves. He is perfectly deceitful, while we are not perfectly anything.

This confrontation in the wilderness was not a fight that we could have won. In fact, while we can recognize a clear parallel between the temptations Jesus

faced in the desert and those confronted by our first parents in the Garden, we cannot compare the magnitude of what He confronted and conquered, to what they faced and surrendered to. The book of Genesis tells us about the reasons why Eve ate the forbidden fruit. Listen carefully to this verse: *“And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat”* (Genesis 3:6). In that verse we recognize three reasons that Eve surrendered to the devil’s scheme: a disordered hunger (the forbidden tree was good for food), it was pleasing to the eyes, and Eve also saw in that fruit, personal gain (it was desired to make one wise). These selfish motivations are the beginning of sin, and Lent is a season for us to confront such fatal flaws. This is a season to reflect on our own disordered appetite for the things that God has forbidden, a time to consider how that which is pleasing to our eyes can lead us away from Him, and Lent is an opportunity for each of us to turn from our own selfish ways that we may more perfectly love God and neighbor.

Our Lord entered His creation to conquer sin and death, to set us free from the chains that bind us, and this battle in the wilderness marks the beginning of Him undoing all that we have done. Jesus begins His journey by confronting, and resisting, the same temptations that our parents faced in the Garden of Eden. In the desert, Jesus had fasted forty days and forty nights. As the God-man, He is fully divine, and fully human. I found some research that was compiled from hunger strikes and discovered that in humans, severe symptoms of starvation begin around 35-40 days, with death occurring between 45-60 days (data taken from the hunger strikes of the Maze Prison in Belfast), yet at the end of a 40 day fast, at a time when Jesus was literally starving to death, when the enemy tempted Him, saying, *“command that these stones be made bread,”* our Lord, who turned water into wine, refused to fill His empty, aching stomach with the bread of disobedience, and instead said to Satan, *“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God”* (Matthew 4:3-4).

Jesus confronted and resisted the first temptation that mankind did not, and two other reasons that humanity fell can be seen in the devil’s final attempt to defeat the Son of God. The devil took Jesus *“up into an exceeding high*

*mountain, and sheweth Him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them*” (Matthew 4:8). Could there be anything more pleasing to the eye than to witness the fullness of the glory found in God’s majestic creation! The enemy, who has this unearthly power of evil, showed our Lord the glory of all the kingdoms of the world, and then added the temptation of personal gain by speaking these deceitful words: *“All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me”* (Matthew 4:9). Like every sinful temptation, this is just another lie, for the world is not the devil’s to give and he wouldn’t give it if it was, *“for he is a liar and the father of lies”* (John 8:44). He promises that you will be filled, but he leaves you hungry for more. He promises you freedom, but leads you into slavery. He promises you life, but *“the wages of sin is death”* (Romans 6:23). Our Lord responded to that final temptation by saying, *“Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve”* (Matthew 4:10).

Jesus overcame the temptations that He faced. He was victorious where Adam and Eve, and we, were not. This Gospel account of the Son of God and the devil in a face-to-face confrontation in the desert should cause us to reflect on the truth of what God has done for us, the fact that God takes no shortcuts in our redemption. As the Sovereign Ruler of Heaven and Earth, we know that He could have chosen any number of ways to save us, but He didn’t choose any number of ways, did He? He didn’t snap His fingers or wave a magic wand. He didn’t stand at a safe distance or insulate Himself from hunger, temptation, pain, suffering, or even the agony of death on a cross.

God sent His Son into the wilderness of this world, in human flesh, to walk the path we walk, to confront and conquer everything that led to our sin and death, and because of that unthinkable, yet historic truth, we find our rest in the assurance that He walks with us still today. In every trial, in every temptation, He knows your pain, for He has walked this suffering. This Lent, unite your life to the One who made you, the One who loves you so much that He freely chose to walk your path, for He is the only One who can minister to you every step of the way, and at the end of your journey here, He is the only One who can open the Door (John 10:9; 14:6) and lead you into God’s heavenly kingdom.