

A Sermon Preached by Pastor Justin Johnson
Our Saviour's Lutheran Church Bellingham, WA
1st Sunday in Lent February 21, 2010
Text: Luke 4:1-13

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and from Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our Gospel reading for today, the story of Jesus' temptation from the Gospel of Luke, follows Jesus' baptism. Yes, just prior to this story we have the story of Jesus being baptized in the Jordan River, where the voice from above proclaims to Jesus, "You are my Son, my Beloved, with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:22) It is also at his baptism where the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove.

And so, full of the Holy Spirit, Jesus returns from the Jordan river and is led by the Spirit out into the wilderness. And it is here where Jesus' identity is challenged, the identity that he has just been given in his baptism.

Luke tells us that Jesus is tempted for 40 days by the devil. I must confess that I had a new understanding when I read this passage this time. I had always understood it to be that Jesus was tempted after his 40 days in the wilderness. But as Luke tells it, he was tempted for 40 days and then we get the temptations that we are told about.

And these temptations are a challenge to Jesus' identity and a temptation to trust in the devil's word or some other word than God's Word. We see this clearly in all three temptations.

The first temptation is this: Jesus is famished, he has been there for 40 days and he had eaten nothing during those 40 days. And so the devil comes to him and reminds Jesus of his identity and then tempts Jesus to put his identity and his power to the test. He says, "Since you are the son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

The devil is tempting Jesus to use his power for his own good. You are the son of God, you deserve to have something to eat, you can make it happen, just do it. How tempting it would be. There is nothing bad about bread in and of itself. We pray for daily bread in the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray and here he has gone for 40 days without bread. I don't see a problem with a little bread.

However, as we pray for daily bread, we trust that God will provide what it is that we need, even if it means God provides work so that we can buy what we need. But here the devil is tempting Jesus to do what he says, to trust in his word. But Jesus rejects it, quoting the word of God. “One does not live by bread alone.”

Next, the devil takes Jesus up to a high place and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and says to Jesus, “I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you then worship me, it will be all yours.” Again, this is a temptation to trust in the devil rather than God, to worship the devil rather than God. The devil is offering Jesus a shortcut to power, and who wouldn’t want that? But Jesus knows that this is an empty promise and again Jesus quotes scripture. “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him.”

Next the devil decides to use the Word of God himself. He takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple, high up in the air and says, “Jump, I dare you, you are the son of God and it says in Psalm 91 ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘On their hands they will lift you up.’”

The devil takes a promise in scripture and turns it into a demand, his own word, and thus again the temptation is to trust in the devil’s word or God’s word. Well, this ends like the other ones, Jesus quotes scripture again, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” And then Luke tells us, “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until a more opportune time.”

I myself would be curious as to what the other tests or temptations were. Did he set before Jesus a chocolate cake, or a cask of wine, or did he bring him upon an oasis, where a beautiful lady just happened to be bathing.

But all of the temptations boil down to this: is Jesus going to trust God’s word and the identity that is given to him in that word or is he going to trust in another word and believe what that other word says about him.

And that is where temptation comes for us as well, to trust in other words other than God’s. Whether those words are our own, or someone else’s. However, any word other than God’s is a promise that is empty.

And the greatest challenge is to know when we are being tempted to do such, when we are starting to slide down that slippery slope. If you think about it, it is easier to resist temptation when you know that you are being tempted.

I have often thought that the greatest temptations come when things are not going well or when I am struggling with something. But usually in those moments, I can recognize the temptation.

For me the greatest danger is when things are going well. It is much easier to trust in other words than God's in those times. For what need is there of God's word if I have everything thing that I need. If we trust in the identity that we are given at work in our jobs, not to say that this is bad, but what happens if that is no longer there and that is the only piece of identity you have?

I cannot help but think of Tiger Woods after his press conference on Friday. It seemed that he had everything going for him. He had money, success, a family, a beautiful wife, what more could he want or need? But he heard other words out there, words that promised him something to lead him into affairs, but we can clearly see now, that whatever those promises were to him, they were empty.

It is easy to trust in ourselves rather than acknowledging that it is God that is providing when we have everything that we need. If you have food and clothes and home and shelter and you have the job that affords you that and you have put the work in, how would you not trust in yourself, or in the job, or in the money?

And so when we face temptations whether those temptations and empty promises come in good times or in bad times, we can learn from Jesus. For Jesus clings to the word of God, a Word that does what it says, a word that is full of promise. It is a word that forgives sins and raises the dead. It is a word that heals the sick and binds up the broken-hearted. It is a word that sustains the weary and strengthens the weak. And it is through the word of God that a claim is made upon us in Baptism, as we are joined to Christ in his death and resurrection we are named as children of God. And so in times of temptation and trial and in good times, we can cling to this identity, trusting in the promises of God in Jesus Christ. That we are loved, that we are of value, that we are forgiven. Thanks be to God. Amen.