

First Sunday of Lent

February 26, 2023

St. Matthew 4:1-11:

“We’re on the Way”

- I. A Look at Our Faith.
- II. Twisting God’s Word.
- III. We’re on the Way.

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Dear Friends in Christ,

Please keep this Scripture in mind: "Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14)." He presents himself as a messenger of God to guide and comfort so life in and with this world will be pleasing...so that one can justify things that should never be justified. Next, this Word of God: "He (Satan) was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him...he is a liar and the father of lies (Jn.8:44b,45)." He doesn't lie just when it's to his advantage. He can't do anything but lie and twist the truth. And this Word of God: "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour (I Pt.5:8)." We cannot kid ourselves, the devil, or one of his minions, is eyeballing you and me, personally.

I've had this statement with me for many years. I'm not sure who the author is, but what it says is significant: "...had Jesus not overcome the temptations in the wilderness, there wouldn't have been a cross. The very point of Satan's temptations was to persuade Jesus to avoid the foolishness of the cross, to entice Him to try attractive shortcuts." That, of course, would have left us helpless and eternally hopeless. That's called the road to hell! We're traveling a different road, the one that leads to eternal joy. This First Sunday of Lent . . .

WE'RE ON THE WAY

I. A Look at Our Faith.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (vv.1-4).'"

If Jesus would have given in to Satan He would have fallen to Satan's word. Instead, Jesus destroyed the challenge with God's Word for He Jesus was the Word made flesh. As the Word says, "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but for us who are being saved it is the power of God (I Cor. 1:18)."

Maybe you'll remember the story about a tourist who came too close to the edge of the Grand Canyon, lost his footing and fell over the side. He managed to grab on to a scrubby bush. Filled with terror, he screamed, "Is there anybody up there?" A calm, powerful voice came out of the sky and replied, "Yes there is." The tourist pleaded, "Can you help me?" The voice replied, "Yes. Do you believe?" The tourist cried out, "Oh yes, I have great faith!" The calm voice said, "In that case, simply let go of the bush and everything will turn out fine." There was a tense pause, then the tourist yelled, "Is there anyone else up there?"

The story has its humor, but we're so often like that tourist. We echo the words, "I believe!" We know the promise God makes: "And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest (that is, the things we need to sustain life and our Father knows we need them). Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you (Lk.12:25,26,30,31)." So here's the question: Have we stopped being anxious? Satan digs away at us. "Do you really believe?" "Did God really say?" Jesus says, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but every word that comes from the mouth of God." At the temptation, Jesus begins His march to Calvary to pay for our lack of trust and doubting God; our moments of justifying what we shouldn't.

II. Twisting God's Word.

Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for

it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you,” and “On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone (vv. 5,6).”

This is one of Satan’s most successful ploys: twisting God’s Word by taking it out of context. He’s convinced so many today, “Well, you can’t take the Bible for what it says. After all, there are many interpretations.” What’s amazing about that thinking is that it’s rarely applied to most other religious writings, if applied at all. But, if you don’t like what the Bible says, then you reinterpret it according to what you want it to say - or just walk away from it. That’s what most do.

In this second temptation, Satan wants Jesus to twist the understanding of trust in God. “Go ahead, jump! Look, the Scriptures say God won’t let anything serious happen to you - if you are the Son of God!” And Jesus clarifies Scripture: “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test (v.7).’”

Do some of us - any of us - have that problem? Twisting, or tweaking, God’s Word so it will mean what we want? Probably. “I know I should have a more active faith life, but I have all these other activities and obligations. God understands!” “Well, you don’t have to go to church to be a Christian.” “The church needs to be more in sync with the thinking of the day.” And what’s amazing is the twisting of Scriptures to support what can’t be supported.

Many, many years ago, a pastor took a seat in a dining car on a train traveling along the Hudson River. Sitting across from him was an atheist. The atheist noted the pastor’s clerical collar, and with that started a discussion. “I see you are a clergyman.” “Yes,” said the pastor. “I suppose you believe the Bible.” The pastor, quite orthodox in his beliefs, responded, “I certainly do believe the Bible to be the Word of God.” “But aren’t there things in the Bible you cannot explain?” The minister answered, “Yes, there are places in the Bible too hard for me to understand.”

With that, the atheist sarcastically demanded, “Well, what do you do then?” Unruffled, the pastor went on eating dinner - which happened to be fish. Looking up, the pastor said, ‘Sir, I do just the same thing as when eating this fish. When I come to the bones, I put them to the side of the plate and go on enjoying my lunch. I leave the bones for some fool to choke on.’

I guess that might sound rough to some, but it’s true. Many prefer choking on the bones. Listen again to the words of the Apostle Paul concerning those who cause others to choke on the bones: “For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:13,14).” The Scriptures put it very bluntly: “The fool says in his heart, ‘there is no God.’ They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none who does good (Ps. 14:1).” And the outcome of their foolishness is summed up in these terrifying words: “Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; death shall be their shepherd, and the upright shall rule over them in the morning. Their form shall be consumed in Sheol, with no place to dwell (Ps. 49:14).”

III. We’re on the Way.

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’” Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him (vv. 8-11).

Jesus overcame the most powerful, overwhelming temptations that have diminished or destroyed the faith of many: the love and sacrifice for this world and the willingness to accept its thinking.

As we well know, Jesus purposely made His way to Calvary and would willingly spill His blood to wash away our damning sin, and secure our forgiveness and eternal life. With that in front of us Luther said, "Whoever sees Christ as a mirror of the Father's heart, actually walks through this world with new eyes." And the new eyes tell us that everything of this world is passing and will quickly pass away. It makes no difference what your age is. It was John Newton, the one who wrote Amazing Grace, who said of Jesus, "His humiliation expiates (makes amends for) our pride; His perfect love atones for our ingratitude; His exquisite tenderness pleads for our insensibility (for our desire to make this world and our flesh our top priorities)." We do want to take to heart Jesus' words: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Mt.6:19-21).

How do we understand His promise: "Keep your life free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you (Heb. 13:5)." And that promise is with us in every hardship we will have to endure here. And we must endure many.

Jesus suffered and endured every temptation that has left us with sorrow and regret. He suffered our hell. But as John wrote, "If we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 Jn. 1:9)." **We're on the Way**, not to a heaven here, but to eternal heaven; God's never ending love and light; victory!

Amen.

Pastor Bill Abbott