

First Sunday in Lent – March 10

The First Sunday in Lent (note the preposition – these are always Sundays “in” not “of” Lent.) is has been the day we read of our Lord’s Temptation for a very long time. This time we get Luke’s particular portrayal of that event. Perhaps it is with good reason we come this week to consider Jesus conquering temptation and the tempter for his people. We certainly have made a bit of a mess of things here. The world seems to be becoming a much more dangerous place. The circus that has unfolded in Washington hardly inspires confidence. But don’t imagine that looking elsewhere will bring any more comfort. The horror of refugees drowning in the Mediterranean, children and their families desperately trying to enter the southern border, the homeless on our own streets, and even the tragedies that often unfold in our own home don’t give much grounds for hope either.

It is a difficult thing to be reminded that we are utterly dependent on Jesus for our success and wellbeing. We would like to think that we can get some of this right, but that would be foolish of us, indeed it might be playing right into our enemy’s hands. Not many of us will be offered opportunities to have angels catch us in mid-air, turn stones to bread or rule the world. Our temptation will likely be much more pedestrian than that. Satan simply won’t have to work that hard on us. He never has to bring out the big guns when he tempts me. I must bore him, it is so easy. Alas, his evil is deep, and though he is surely bored, he never relinquishes his hold on me willingly. I am trapped in his iron grip.

I am not sure that we acknowledge just how thorough our corruption really is. Our language gives us away. We walk past a plate of donuts and speak of “temptation.” But that is not temptation; that is gluttony. That is a desire that lives inside of me. Satan doesn’t need to plant that there. Jesus is rather clear that our thought-sins, the lusts of our hearts, the hatreds we feel and think, are just as much a sin as the actual deed. (Matthew 5) We like to blame someone else but the real problem is right here, right in my heart, in my mind. I am used to it and think this is normal. It is not normal. It is a twisted, bent, and shattered humanity. This truth flies in the face of some of our most cherished modern ideas of which is a human being. The preacher has a difficult task in all this.

Today’s theme is the message to folks like me and you and all humanity who are willing to take that honest and sober look at ourselves. Jesus has beaten our foe, yes even the stinker who lives inside of me. We were powerless before the might of our enemy. Death’s cruel grasp is relentless. Sin infects us thoroughly. Of ourselves we are born into Satan’s infernal kingdom and we have no escape. We toil away in its grim and dark passageways for our whole lives, with no hope to see the sun. But Jesus has broken Satan’s hold over humanity. One human, Jesus, has resisted him, has not succumbed to that tempter’s wiles. And just as one man’s failure resulted the death of all, likewise the victory of one man has also had implication for the whole species. He has brought us all life.

Collect of the Day

O Lord God, You led Your ancient people through the wilderness and brought them to the promised land. Guide the people of Your Church that following our Savior we may walk through the wilderness of this world toward the glory of the world to come; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

I don't want to be flip, especially on the first Sunday in Lent, but the first line of the prayer is almost too good to pass up if you are ministering to a typical LCMS congregation these days. "God led his ancient people..." From looks of the folks sitting the pew at my parish he still is leading ancient people! I used to have this really sweet elderly woman who was simply dear, silly, frivolous woman who showed up at every Bible study. Church was simply her life. One day we were talking about the exodus and she exclaimed something about how Moses had held up his arms as the people crossed the Red Sea, and then stood up to demonstrate. I commented that not being as old as Pat, I would have to defer to her recollection of the events. She took great delight in reminding me every few months thereafter that I needed to show her a little respect, after all, she was as old as Moses.

On a more serious vein, the prayer would have us start off from the perspective of people rescued, the people of Israel, crossing into the Promised Land. Remember last week's lessons included the story of Moses' death and divine burial. We were there a week ago, today it continues with us. God has led us through that wilderness and brought his people to the Promised Land.

How does the image of the Exodus help us understand the people to whom we are preaching and the lives they are living?

- 1. We are sojourners here on earth – as they did not belong in the wilderness but were heading to a promised land. Does this allow us to create a distance between them and this world? Does this help us explain why we are uncomfortable in this world? Does it help us understand why we look at the current political debates and wonder where Jesus is in any of this? Can we look at it and say that this is not heaven?*
- 2. Pilgrims are always on the way somewhere – they are expecting to arrive. They have set out on a journey because they anticipate getting there. You could call that hope, you could call that an expectation. It allows us to speak of death differently. Death, while always a grim enemy, is a grim enemy defeated. Jesus' resurrection means a funeral is a moment of joy for the people who have gathered.*
- 3. We might resonate more with the emigrant narrative. Our ancestors at some point all made a long, perhaps hazardous journey to this land. It was risky, it was hazardous, and it was worth it. They did not go back. They did not know exactly how it would turn out, and dreams were surely left unfulfilled in some respects, but for many it was a real blessing. Could we work into the story of the refugees who are fleeing oppression to come to what they believe is a better land? Is it an accident of history that these better lands*

are almost all Christian? Does being a Christian pilgrim mean we become more hospitable to the person who flees?

What if we don't have a journey narrative? We could say that this world is all we get. There is no other/better place. We might despair. We also might be tempted to think that heaven is something we create here on earth. This is what we make of it. Sometimes the social justice warriors can fall into this side of the ditch.

There is a danger as well to the pilgrimage narrative – it can get us so focused on the other place that we lose sight of this place entirely. The pilgrim is here – but he also not here – it is a really healthy place for a Christian to be. In Lutheran terms, this provides us with a really important tension.

The children of Israel lived in tents. They were not home, and yet it was homey. God blessed them greatly in that journey time. They ate the manna, drank water from the rock, and followed his pillar of cloud and fire.

Today, we want that same Red Sea-parting, Moabite-smiting, bread-giving, water-gushing God to show up for our sake. But our needs are not quite so dramatically easy to see as those folks long ago. Our wilderness is often a bleak landscape of a world which has completely turned its back on God, in which sexual immorality is embraced, drug use is legalized, and in which the unborn are a burden which is a woman's right to eliminate. This is a world in which Homer Simpson is a sort of hero, and reality television is odder than the fiction. In this world you might just enter a toddler in a beauty pageant or attend your gay cousin's wedding to his "husband." In this world you will make and break promises as though they are made of paper and toothpicks, and if you get rich doing it, you will be applauded, an exemplar of success.

Realizing that many of our folks are elderly, do our people feel the wilderness bite them hard, when the wonder if their children are going to get another divorce? Will their grandchildren ever go to church? Will their son-in-law who has always provided all the things for their daughter but who has now lost his job be able to handle this? Will their health fail? Will their insurance plan suffice? Will they end up in a nursing home, drooling while some CNA they don't know tries to feed them with a spoon and little later will be back to change their diaper.

Is their fear even more spiritual? Do they wonder if they have enough faith? Do they have the right sort of faith? Have they lived up to expectations? What if they haven't? Is there a judgment with a down escalator waiting for me at the end of time, at the end of my life which is so rapidly approaching? Do they see their own children and grandchildren running away from church and do they wonder if they are to blame? Will God hold them accountable? I think our youth culture sometimes forgets that elderly people are asking a totally different question set than the young people are. Yet, look at our confirmation materials. They are all geared toward young people. I think we miss something here. The great evangelism opportunity that lies before us includes a lot of old folks who are facing the end of life and all the questions it presents us.

We are heading toward another glory, an Easter glory, an eschatological glory, a heavenly home, a promised land. To traverse this great desert we will need a full measure of hope, a picture of the victory that will be fully ours when he who has begun the good work in us brings it to completion on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Our guide is not some distant star, some impersonal life force, or a deity safely ensconced on heaven's throne; although, he is there too. Our guide is one who knows the tempter's might first hand, who has wrestled, contended, and won. Is the good news for an elderly soul who feels like a total failure and is afraid of living and dying really that in this opportune moment, the same Jesus who won that day is fighting side by side with you today.

If you are looking for a great read and a reflection on today's texts, consider the life of St. Anthony by Athanasius (the same guy whose name is attached to the Creed.) He really was an ancient Christian – lived to be 105! You can read it on the Internet at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/VITA-ANTONY.html>

St Anthony is portrayed in this document as more of an athletic hero, a champion. In the early Christian communities the monastic figures were deemed the prayer warriors who defended the whole community against the assaults of the Devil. Before he could come into our town, he had to get past that guy living in a cave outside of town.

Readings

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

“When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance and have taken possession of it and live in it, ² you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there. ³ And you shall go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him, ‘I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our fathers to give us.’ ⁴ Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down before the altar of the LORD your God.

⁵ “And you shall make response before the LORD your God, ‘A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. ⁶ And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. ⁷ Then we cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. ⁸ And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. ⁹ And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰ And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O LORD, have given me.’ And you shall set it down before the LORD your God and worship before the LORD your God. ¹¹ And you shall rejoice in all the good that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.

On the first Sunday of Lent with all the penitential themes that swirl around us, this seems like an odd choice, more appropriate for November. But if you are going to repent, really repent of your sins, you need some vision of what that means, of the thanksgiving which belongs on the other side of that repentant act. We don't just repent to repent, but we repent seeking forgiveness and the very favor of God. This text addresses people in the dry and barren desert and speaks to them of what they will do when they have plenty, when their gardens are green and their larders are full.

Perhaps the real question should focus on the temptation story of Jesus? Is it not the first time that a human being has resisted the tempter? Is it not the first time since Adam and Eve that anyone in humanity got this right? Is Jesus' victory over Satan not really a picture of our promised land? Is this not a vision of heaven itself? Moses does not say "If you get there..." but he says "When you get there..." That is the Gospel in this story. In the wilderness of this world he shouts that same "When you get there...." To us too.

When Moses writes this to the people of Israel, they are still in the desert; they are not yet in the Promised Land. This is describing a rite and sacrifice which will be made only when they have been there for a few months, when the first crops are harvested. You have to remember that these people, in the story of the Exodus, have never harvested wheat in an entire generation. They have been eating Manna every day, no one has planted, no one has harvested; they have simply gone out every morning into the desert and found food lying about on the ground. This must have sounded like an alien world to them. Moses was using a vocabulary which they would hardly have understood. Imagine talking to your grandparents about computers or jet plane travel in 1930.

Yet Moses is giving them detailed instructions, down to the basket and what the priest is supposed to do and putting words into the mouths of the Israelites. This is a very effective technique and is in fact similar to one way to read the temptation scene with Christ. This is not about current reality as much as it is a picture of what we will be able to do in heaven. The assaults of the evil foe will fail on that day. It is unfathomable to us now, but it will be true. So we are given this picture of Jesus today, in a direct parallel to this event which Moses describes. Jesus is demonstrating the victory he has won for us all.

The preacher who is attracted to this text, however, will likely want to focus more on the second part of the text as the worshipper is given a set little speech to say at the moment of presentation. "My father was a wandering Aramean..." you might want to play on that a little bit. The politicians who are vying for our attention frequently like to tell us the story of their origins. Lincoln fostered the idea that he was born in a log cabin. Chris Christy tells the story his Italian emigrant ancestors who got on a boat and came to America. We Christians claim to be the descendants of a wandering Aramean, Abraham, who through his descendants went to Egypt, grew, got enslaved, and whom God rescued with mighty acts of deliverance. That's our story.

After all, Paul asserts in Galatians and elsewhere that all who believe in Christ are the true Israel. As the old VBS song used to assert, Father Abraham indeed has many sons, and I am one

of them, and so are you. Our father is Abraham, the wandering Aramean. That means that the exodus story is our story. Every year when the Jews gather for the Passover, the youngest person present asks the eldest to explain all this. His stock response always begins with the same words: "When we were in Egypt..." it is not when our parents or ancestors were in Egypt, but when we were. Each generation is brought back to that time, they are the generation liberated.

Thus the discussion of the mighty acts of God will be the best place for the preacher today. As I have asserted earlier, this is not really a manual on how to resist temptation or a guide book on how to be a good person. This is a record of God's mighty acts on our behalf. The worshiper who brought his little basket of first fruits and set it before the altar was given to remember the rescue which God had effected through the exercise of his strength and might against Egyptians and Moabites and Ammonites and giants like Og and Sihon.

God brought them to this rich and fertile land, this place of abundant pastures – milk, and wild places where bees live in the trees and provide honey. This is all about God doing something, not about me doing something. This is the hardest thing for new Christians to get their head really around. Heaven simply is not for sale. God does not reward us with His love. He does not love us because we made a decision, because we believe, because we repent, because we do a single blasted thing. God simply loves us. Any attempt to locate a cause for God's love in us becomes a form of self-idolatry. Any attempt to notice that God loves me over and against someone else, because I am somehow different, is hubristic.

That is why this day locates us here. It is the start and the heart of the Christian faith. God has rescued us.

In I Corinthians 15, Paul refers to Jesus as the first fruits of those who have died, the first fruit of the resurrection. Is he deliberately connecting Jesus to this passage when he does that?

Psalm 91:1-13

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

² I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust."

³ For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence.

⁴ He will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

⁵ You will not fear the terror of the night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,

⁶ nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.

- ⁷ A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.
- ⁸ You will only look with your eyes
and see the recompense of the wicked.
- ⁹ Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place—
the Most High, who is my refuge—
- ¹⁰ no evil shall be allowed to befall you,
no plague come near your tent.
- ¹¹ For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
- ¹² On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.
- ¹³ You will tread on the lion and the adder;
the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot.
- ¹⁴ *“Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him;
I will protect him, because he knows my name.*
- ¹⁵ *When he calls to me, I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble;
I will rescue him and honor him.*
- ¹⁶ *With long life I will satisfy him
and show him my salvation.”*

I must admit that the failure to include the final three verses is somewhat inexplicable to me. This is a really important psalm, a prayer which simply belongs in the vocabulary of our people. I have been privileged in Rome to visit several communities of monks who are chanting these psalms every day of their lives. They have deeply pondered these words and these words have shaped the lives of these men and women. It is beautiful to see.

We of course have the words which we sing/say in this psalm because they are one of the quotations which the Devil will use against Jesus (vss 11-12). We get to see the whole thing in context and of course see how even God’s Word can be twisted around. The temptation to cast oneself off the temple is the urge to test God’s promise, not the trust which flows out of the promise and the relationship which God created in his promise. Shall I see if my family loves me enough to visit me in prison? Shall I go and hold up a liquor store with a pistol and get caught, just to test their love? What foolishness! But the devil is a fool about these things. He just doesn’t get love, the sort of love which the Psalmist sings about.

The preacher might consider this psalm as something of a sermon outline. It would work to preach your way through it, reading and developing a couple verses at a time. If we sing the appointed sermon hymn of the day, it starts with the words of the first verses: A Mighty Fortress

is our God! There are several other allusions and connections to this psalm within the hymn, which is usually said to be based on Psalm 46. Luther, remember, was one of those monkish types who had sung the psalms every day for years. They were his first subject he taught at the University of Wittenberg. He knew them intimately and their language and theology simply ran in his veins, permeated his thoughts, and flowed from his pen.

Romans 10:8b-13

⁵ For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. ⁶ But the righteousness based on faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷ “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸ But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); ⁹ because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. ¹¹ For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” ¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. ¹³ For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Here we must wrestle with the word “necessity.” It is indeed necessary to believe, to confess Jesus Christ, to be a person of faith. But what do we mean when we say it is necessary to have faith? Jesus even will say occasionally in the Gospels that faith has saved the person whom he has just healed. But in truth, we know that faith does not save me, God does. What is the role of faith and confession in my own salvation? What is the role of repentance? In this text Paul uses a conditional clause: If you confess...believe...then you will be saved. We of course use such conditional clauses all the time and in many different ways, but our predominant use of them is to speak of necessity and cause and effect relationships. I would tell the contractor who is working on my house, “if you have fixed the leak, then you will be paid.” Praise God, it is not so here.

Perhaps we need to clarify. In verse 9 Paul speaks of a future salvation which seems to be contingent on faith. But I would have you think that this word salvation has become a real church word with us. We ask folks if they are “saved” and use the term in some really interesting ways. But the word salvation is really “saved” or “rescue” Think life guard here. I think Paul is talking about the rescue which God will effect when he reaches into the grave and pulls me out, like a life guard taking us from the water in which I am drowning. The real question is whether Paul is saying that the rescue is somehow contingent on the faith and confession? Are the mute just out of luck? Is the person who is mentally retarded and cannot speak or really even think about Jesus clearly to make a silent confession, is that person unable to be saved? Hardly.

It is verse 10 which I think gives us a little insight here. The confession is tied to the justification, and the words of the mouth are tied to this rescue. Notice that here the justification and the rescue are in the present tense, not the future there.

Now we need a little excursus into theology: Objective justification and subjective justification. Objectively, Jesus has shed his blood for the whole world. Every sin is paid for. Yet, there is also a subjective justification. The salvation of God is bestowed through faith, a relationship with Christ in which he saves, we are his creature, we are his beloved. Remember, we preach objective justification but aim for subjective justification. If you preach subjective it will be come fideism – a belief in faith or semi-pelagian arminianism, a trust in decision.

Much of this, however, is dependent on our understanding of the word faith. We tend to see faith as a thing which we possess, an action or virtue which we have. Faith is in fact something which is a first person action, faith trusts, faith loves, faith hopes. We will not understand this text until we start to faith. (Yes, I mean that as a verb.)

My OT prof used to use this example of what he called a “conditional clause of demonstration” and it still works: “If the window is wet, it is raining outside.” The drops of water I see on my window pane are not the cause of the rain, quite the other way around. The drops of water on the window pane demonstrate the fact of the rain. The rain caused the window pane to be wet. Likewise here in Romans: If I believe and confess, it is because God saves me. The faith in my heart is the result of God’s justification of me. The confession of my lips is the result of God’s rescue of me.

Alas, English betrays us here, as it sometimes does. Our use of the conditional clauses is so weighted to the causal way of thinking, that we quite naturally jump into a cause and effect thought here. And since that makes sense to us, and since it is the way that the world works otherwise, we quickly come to the conclusion that we somehow, by believing and confession, have made ourselves in some way more acceptable to God and therefore are saved. I have had too many faithfully attending folks nod in agreement when I have preached this, and then on their deathbeds assure me that they have believed and the result is that God will save them, clearly believing that what sets them apart from the hell-bound person in the hospital bed down the hall is that we got it right.

I know that God’s love tolerates a tremendous amount of error in all of us. But this error is particularly pernicious because it breeds a caustic form of spiritual pride. I can look down on the damned and cluck about their plight, all the while preening myself for getting this faith thing right. Nothing can be more harmful to the evangelistic task of the Christian movement. We are saved by God’s grace, period. If I point to anything in myself which is somehow better/different or simply worthy of God’s love over against another human being, I open myself up to the valid charge of hypocrisy and I can simply forget about meaningfully communicating the Gospel in that situation. Even if the thing I am pointing to is my confession and my faith, I cannot speak of those things as if they are somehow the key or the saving element. God has rescued me.

This is the point at the end of our reading. God loves Jew and Greek alike. There is no distinction in the love of God. He loves the pagan and the witchdoctor; he loves the Hindu, Buddhist, and observer of Native American spirituality. He loves the spiritually indifferent and the avowed atheist with the same overwhelmingly deep love with which he loves me.

Because God's love is truly love, he will never force it, he will never overpower us. He will woo us and call us. Faith is the relationship he awakens with that gentle love, the confession in which delights is simple the echo of what he has said to us. When I declare Jesus is my Savior, it is only repeating what he has declared to me, it is not my manifesto of my theological or other correctness.

So what is preachable in this text? I am fascinated by the fact that somehow the things I do in community with my fellow believers are important. Confession is not a solo act. The church I go to, the people I am surrounded by, they are shaping me all the time. In a very real sense, this word that is in my heart and on my lips finds expression in the church. I need to hear the confession of others and I need to make my confession before others. I think a good sermon could be made here about worship, about the importance of what we do together as the people of God in this place. I may not remember every worship service as an ecstatic event, branded on my memory, just as I would be hard pressed to tell you what I had for dinner a week ago this evening. But I know that I ate; it nourished me. I certainly would have remembered a night I went to bed hungry. Likewise worship, the confessing and hearing, the singing and the prayer together wash over us and shape us, subtly and often without dramatic changes from week to week, but over the course of a lifetime they significantly reshape and remake us. The word on our lips and in our hearts is vital to God saving us. Consider the words about the Psalm above as well.

Luke 4:1-13

And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness ² for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry. ³ The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." ⁴ And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.'" ⁵ And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, ⁶ and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸ And Jesus answered him, "It is written,

"You shall worship the Lord your God,
and him only shall you serve."

⁹ And he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written,

"He will command his angels concerning you,
to guard you,'

¹¹ and

“On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.”

¹² And Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” ¹³ And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.

¹⁴ And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.

I have included the next two verses so you can see that from the temptation Jesus launched right into His ministry.

How shall we read this text?

- 1. Is it a call for us to repent? We have not resisted temptation like Jesus did. Does this text simply show us our failures?*
- 2. Is this better understood as the story of our victory over the tempter in Jesus? Is he our hero who overcomes the evil one who would otherwise conquer and devour us? Is Jesus the David who slays Goliath and thereby delivers victory to the entire army of Israel?*
- 3. Does the text speak to us about the nature of temptation itself? The enemy starts with Jesus weakness, moves to his strength – first his hunger then his desire to do the good deed through the righteous exercise of authority.*
- 4. Does Jesus offer us a primer on resisting temptation? Jesus responds to temptation with the Word – does the text coupled with Paul’s words mean that the word on our lips empowers our resistance to all temptation?*
- 5. Does the victory over Satan speak to the authority with which Jesus ministered and eventually died? Does he do everything he does from this point forward as the one who licked Satan in a fair fight? Does his death on a cross take on new meaning because he did not succumb to temptation on this day?*
- 6. Does this simply answer some questions about what Jesus will do in the subsequent chapters? He has no feet of clay, no vice. Take a close look and you won’t find a closet womanizer or some guy lining his pockets. He is not making a power grab, he has already turned down the lordship of the kingdoms of the earth. He is not after self-gain; he turned down bread when he was hungry. He is not after popularity and fame; he could have had lots of that jumping off the temple in the midst of amazed countrymen who had come to worship God. Some indeed appear to have thought that this was a sign of the true messiah. He could have saved himself a lot of trouble if he had just done this sort of a miracle.*

How does this passage connect to the reading we had last week, the story of Jesus and three disciples on the mountain top. Moses failed, he was denied the Promised Land. But on that night

of the transfiguration he got to enter that land. We made that point last week, is Luke making that point again?

Luke connects this story to the OT rather subtly. Jesus heads out into the wilderness, the Exodus place, the place of Elijah's sojourn, and Moses' great work. Jesus wrestles with the ancient foe and prevails. He fasts, he suffers, he prays. The tempter who has caused every human being to stumble since the days of our parents in the garden will himself stumble, having given it his best shot. Simply put, this story has Satan fail. For the first time in the history of humanity he will leave the field without his prey in his jaws. Instead he will beat a hasty retreat, humbled and vanquished. Should we entitle this story not the Temptation of Christ but the Failure of Satan? Is this the second Fall story in the Bible but this time it is Satan who falls? Luke may have intended it that way as he mentions Satan falling from heaven like in Luke 10:17ff. There Jesus gives his authority to his disciples over a Satan who has clearly been subdued.

Today that foe still wanders about, a roaring lion Peter tells us, but he is all the more dangerous for this wounding he receives today. He is a wounded beast, chained to hell (Rev. 20:1-3), unable to touch the names this Jesus has written in heaven on the day of our Baptism (Luke 10:20.) He will strive mightily to cause us to betray those names, for that is what he is really after. He might assault our bodies, our minds, our family, and home. He will try to tear down our churches and cause them to be places of conflict and strife instead of peace and hope. He will cast us into wars and economic distress. He will tempt us with the blandishments of the flesh and the allure of fame, success, and money. He is good at this, but he also knows that he is defeated, and that makes him desperate.

Jesus has defeated him. The catechumens who were enrolled in the intensive educational processes of the early church seem to have started with this story. You can imagine why. The Christianity into which they were journeying was a radically different world from that of the Roman Empire. This would not be easy. There were strong pressures to return and conform to the larger society. The wrapping of church and state into one cultural reality meant that this might mean loss of job, loss of place, prestige, or rank. In the much the same way that modern Indian caste Hindus are rejected from their caste if they convert to Christianity and they are forced into the category of untouchable in some instances, early Christians would have faced intense societal pressures against conversion. They start out with victory, this is what Christianity promises them. The enemy against which you feel so helpless has been defeated. You are joining the same team with the guy who beat him. One day, that victory will be lived out in your life completely. You too will wear the victor's crown. But it will not be easy.

But what about us today? We have already signed up for the most part. We are not enrolling our catechumens on Ash Wednesday, this is not their first lesson. Often this text has become a sort of manual on how to resist temptation and it has its merits that way. I have actually taught and used it that way. Jesus' use of Scripture and the insights into the modus operandi of the enemy are helpful training for the Christian.

But I wonder if we are not kidding ourselves if we think this message has completely been internalized by our congregants. How often don't we get discouraged at the persistence of sin and the seeming success of evil all around us? How often are we not depressed by the failure of the good guys and the destruction of the beautiful things only to be replaced by the crude, vulgar, and barbarous? Or worse, do we even notice when those things happen anymore? Are we simply so used to sin and its apparent victory in our lives that we just blandly shrug our shoulders and let it pass. Do we see every evil as something that Jesus has defeated? Do we see every sin as something which Christ has ultimately eliminated from our lives? Do we recognize that the power of Satan cannot last, it is broken, and not even death can hold us now? Or do we work on coping skills instead of sharpening our spiritual weaponry?

A few things to say about the temptation itself: Notice the use of scripture by Satan. He always misuses it. The Bible itself is a tool for destruction when not used for the good of the hearer. Handing out a copy of the Bible is not really evangelism. The Word of God can be twisted and used for evil purposes.

Jesus responds with the Scriptures. They are a potent defense against the machinations of our foe. Scripture empowers the believer to resist temptation. How will we use it properly? That question is important for all of us to think about.

A faithful reading and careful consideration of this text means we end up somewhere in the middle on this. The Bible is more than just a book, but it is not a magic pill or something which is good in and of itself. Only God is truly that sort of good. The preacher will want to exercise care lest he fall into a Biblicism on one side of this, or an equally dangerous diminution of the Word of God and its potency on the other side of the equation.

The pattern of Satan's temptation is also interesting. The Gospels are not always consistent in their portrayal of this. But in this I find the observation of C. S. Lewis helpful. He notes that Satan first goes for our weakness. Jesus is hungry. He offers him bread. When that fails, he tries to turn the strength of the person into an occasion to stumble. Jesus does not use his power for his own benefit, so Satan tries to play on that. He would make an excellent king. He would be able to get health care reformed! He would be able to create a just and equitable system. He is above self-serving corruption. Likewise, if we do not stumble on the side of our weakness, we will likely fall even more disastrously from our strength.

A penultimate thought: notice that the Devil leaves him for a more opportune time. There are times and places in which we are more susceptible to the wiles of our foe. Jesus clearly thinks that Peter's attempt to dissuade him from the Jerusalem mission is one of them. He calls Peter "Satan" that day.

Lastly, again I am indebted to Lewis on this. It is worth noting that Jesus knows far better what real temptation is like than we do. He resisted; the Devil gave it his best shot. The Devil never really has to work that hard on me. I don't know how much leverage he can bring to bear on my mind and life. I cave way before he gets there. Some would deny the incarnation by suggesting

that this event was never in doubt, Jesus was not really tempted. But in fact he was. He was a real human being in this. He knows temptation far better than I do. What he doesn't know as well as me is what it is like to cave in so easily.

Law

1. We are so weak before our enemy. The problems I see all about me and which afflict me seem to be so insurmountable. I look to the powers in Washington and they are gridlocked. I look to the power of knowledge and science and find it is just as adept at destroying me as helping me. Where will we find resolution to these things?
2. These problems are not just mine, but they are problems which face all of us. We confess that we are sinful and worthy of God's punishment. There is a sense that this is a corporate problem, a reality which the whole of humanity faces. Will we ruin the climate? Will we nuke ourselves into a new stone age? Will we unleash some horrible genetic modification on the planet and cause widespread death and destruction? All have been proposed.
3. But these problems are also personal. The whole human condition finds its expression in my own life and I am powerless before it. My sins are but a small slice of this problem. I am an addict to sin, chained inexorably to this body of death, I have no hope of a solution.
4. And thus my neighbor is first a potential problem, perhaps a competitor for the diminishing resource. In any event, I will see him first and foremost as someone against whom I will measure myself. Has he or she figured something out that I have missed? Can I say that I have figured out something that he or she has not? if I am saved, do I want to draw the line in the sand behind my heels to keep "them" out?
5. This can devolve into banality. I can see my fellow Christian as somehow "wrong" and much more wrong for his Baptist terminology or Methodist manners. (Of course the Catholics are right out.)

Gospel

1. Jesus has defeated Satan's power. It is broken. There is a man who has not succumbed to evil in any way.
2. Jesus has given this victory to me as well. His victory is not just a personal victory, but it is a victory on behalf of all humanity.
3. That means that I am saved as well.
4. This has real implications for how I see my fellow human being. Christ's victory is not just for me and the folks whom I count as Christians, but Jesus has won this for the whole of humanity.

5. My congregation is likely a menagerie of Christians, they come from all sorts of different backgrounds, perhaps a few disaffected Episcopalians, an ELCA Lutheran or two, a Catholic refugee and a Baptist thrown in. God's love totally transcends the barriers we erect.

Sermon Ideas

1. A Mighty Fortress! (Psalm - That the hearer would begin this Lenten journey in the sure and certain confidence that Christ has rescued them from sin, death, and Devil.)

We are near the beginning of a long Lenten journey this day. These journeys are often daunting when you start out. It looks like we have so far to go. Our lives are such a mess and heaven is so perfect. How will we ever have true Easter joy? Will I just be faking it come the end of March when the Easter lilies and white paraments have replaced the somber effects of Lent? The Psalm today speaks to people like us. It speaks words of hope.

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.

² I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust."

We just sang the hymn of the Reformation – a Mighty Fortress. Or perhaps you want to reserve the hymn until after the sermon – it might make a very good way to conclude this sermon and give your people a new way to sing this old Lutheran favorite. It sounded a little odd perhaps on this day. But the Christian is never solo. His/her strength is always that of God and his Christ. We are not relying upon our own strength here, but on His. Our busy world would tell us what to do. But that busy-ness of life often gets in the way of our repentance and contemplation. But this psalm reminds us that the most important thing about us is what we are. We are the people who dwell in God's protection. We are the people whom God has promised to love, cherish, and protect in the water of that Baptism. We are the people he feeds at this altar. We are those sheep of his flock. We are the children to whose prayer he turns a father's ear.

³ For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence.

⁴ He will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness is a shield and buckler.

⁵ You will not fear the terror of the night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,

⁶ nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
nor the destruction that wastes at noonday.

Look at what this God does for us! We are helpless little birds in a big and dangerous world. There are many who would catch and devour us, if not today another day. Do not imagine that we can watch a flock of geese fly off and say that I will be one of the lucky ones who will not perish. There are no lucky ones. Eventually death will have its way with every one of us. The fowler is very thorough – the fowler is death.

But even on that deadly day God covers us with his wings and under his protection we are safe. Jesus has not only conquered our tempting foe, but also our bitterest enemy, death. This is a Sunday, after all, not numbered in the days of this penitential season. It is a little Easter because Jesus rose on this day of the week. It is always a party day. The world and its threats cannot intimidate us. Let them take us, goods, fame, child, and spouse, let them all be gone, let the world be filled with a thousand demons, one little Word can defeat them, the Word who is the Christ.

⁷ A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you.

⁸ You will only look with your eyes
and see the recompense of the wicked.

This will not always be easy to bear. The psalmist is not promising us an easy victory in which our foes simply melt before us. Thousands may perish. Indeed, death's bitter grip will chill one, inflame another, and excruciate a third. If you have never been around someone who is dying, it is hard work. But we will see these things differently now. They are the results of sin. They affect and afflict us all. But they are not the only story to which we listen. There is another story, another narrative which speaks of another and greater truth than sin, death, and grave.

⁹ Because you have made the LORD your dwelling place—
the Most High, who is my refuge—
¹⁰ no evil shall be allowed to befall you,
no plague come near your tent.

In this story the man or woman whom God has raised up from this baptismal font is spared from that real death which is hell. For God is our refuge and strength. The angel of death, that horrible plague who consumed the first born of Egypt will not come to us. The blood of the Passover sacrifice has been painted on our doors. We will be safe from the real danger, the real foe.

¹¹ For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.

¹² On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.

¹³ You will tread on the lion and the adder;
the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot.

This will not be our doing. He does not endow us with some super-human strength which we can now demonstrate to the world like a super-hero in the comics or movies which we like to watch. Our weakness does not depart from us, but his angels carry us. I will succumb to this physical death which I once feared and loathed like the rest of humanity should. Weak and helpless before it I will be lifted up and born over the shattered corpse of Satan, that wicked adder, that ravenous lion, to live the life which God has already begun in me and which he feeds this day. He is the fortress of that life, not me.

¹⁴ “Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him;
I will protect him, because he knows my name.

¹⁵ When he calls to me, I will answer him;
I will be with him in trouble;
I will rescue him and honor him.

¹⁶ With long life I will satisfy him
and show him my salvation.”

Here Christ speaks right to us. Jesus speaks these words to you and your people. Get them ready to listen to them!

2. Christ my Champion! (Gospel - That the hearer believe that Jesus Christ has won the victory over my otherwise indomitable foe, thereby empowering my own struggle against sin and devil and assuring me of the final victory.)

My Problem –

1. A God problem – I am trapped in my own sin and wretchedness. All my best attempts to emend my own life have resulted only in failure or the realization that the sin I thought to remove was only the tip of the iceberg.
 - A. I often find that I am unable to stop sinning which leads me to give up or not care about my sin – doubly dead!
 - B. If I do succeed in conquering a sin, reforming my life and changing my behavior, I then find that under that sin lies another bigger problem – usually my own pride.
 - C. Buried beneath my tightly controlled exterior often rages a whole world of dreams, passions, desires, and lusts that the world has labeled normal but God calls sin.
2. My God problem has eternal consequences – there is no place in the kingdom of heaven for the sinner. Just as I would be horribly out of place in an orchestra if you put an instrument in my hands, I will be terribly out of place in heaven. Because I have this sin problem, I don't belong there.

3. Those consequences are not limited to the realm of eternity – My life as it is now is not healthily lived.
 - A. Who does not know the pain and angst of severed relationship?
 - B. My own physical challenges are but a precursor of the fact that one day I will simply fail to breathe. I will die.
 - C. Life itself is much more than simply avoiding death, however, I find that in this broken sinful life are places of great emptiness and longing. Is it a longing for God, that One whose presence gives rest to our restless souls?
 - D. While Jesus spoke much of food to a hungry people so long ago, I believe today his message to folks of the 21st century would be much more focused on rest. In the struggle against myself and sin, I find that I am often very weary.

God's Solution – A crucified victor!

1. Jesus has just borne the sins of the world to the penitential waters of John's baptism and will shortly carry them up the cruel steps of Golgatha's hill. In this text, Jesus beats the Devil at Satan's game.
2. While I so quickly cave into Satan's devices and pressure, Jesus did not and bore up manfully under the full onslaught of Satan's attack.
3. Jesus' victory is not just a victory which is experienced at the end of time, at the final judgment. Jesus has won a victory over my daily tempter as well.
4. This empowers my response. While I may not always see victory in my daily life, connected to Christ and his victory here and on the cross gives me both inspiration and power in the struggle against sin – I am able to win in ways that a Christ-less person is not.

Caveat Predicator (look out preacher)! This treads dangerously close to a “success” gospel: that Christ guarantees success and that failure is the result of a faith failure. That is a line we must be careful not to cross. The cross still covers all, but at the same time, the cross also has positive things to say and do in this life right now!

Illustration potential –

In the global fight against AIDS, one of the great bright spots is in the nation of Kenya where an aggressive abstinence and chastity program has radically reduced new infections. While the ending of this story is not written yet and these things can change very quickly, there is a power to the message of victory for those struggling to live life healthily and better. This is tough to find online, many of the resources attribute to

government spending, but folks on the ground suggest that the greater impact is due to the religious leadership.

The recent movie about the writing of “Amazing Grace” and the story of John Newton who went from being a slaver captain to an abolitionist preacher might also work well.

You also might point to the numerous stories and testimonies from those who have been enabled to resist temptation presented by addiction or other serious sins, but be careful, this is not just about the “really bad stuff” the real story is when we start to address the real sins that really inhabit our people’s more pedestrian lives as well. The gossip, the liar, the time-waster, the slothful, all also have sins which condemn us just as do the sins of the addict, criminal, and spectacular sinner.

If you have read “The Hammer of God” by Bo Giertz there is a great sermon in there toward the end of the book about a guy who starts clearing stones from a field.

You might also read C. S. Lewis – *The Screwtape Letters*

3. “Confessing his love!” (Epistle - That the hearer would confess the goodness which God has, is and will do for him/her, rejoicing that God enjoys and delights in the confession of our lips and the faithful response of our hearts.)

This sermon is based on the Epistle lesson for the day, but will find resonance in the OT lesson and the Gospel as well. We want to struggle a little with the role of faith and our confession in all this. Faith is necessary for salvation, Jesus says it, and Paul says it here. But what is faith? is it not the relationship which God engenders with his love? Is not the necessary and saving faith which confesses Christ and believes in Jesus really the very gift of God to me?

The problem with seeing faith as something else is it breeds a form of spiritual pride, an ecclesial snobbery which dares to suggest that I have somehow, with my faith, gotten it right where others have failed to do so. Such an attitude is poisonous. If I would come to the unbeliever from the position of being superior to them, there is no way for me to speak to them without sounding condescending and judgmental. It would dam up the flow of Christ’s love through us to others.

This is the opportune moment, the moment when the enemy comes to us and would not tempt us for our weakness, but our strength. He would turn our Christianity into a matter of our pride. And in causing us to stumble, he ensnares us in a sticky trap. By subtly changing the way we perceive ourselves, mixing in a little truth with the lie, we are so much easier to deceive. We are special to Jesus, he does love us. The lie is that he loves us for our confession or our belief.

The OT lesson speaks to us of a rescue, and Jesus is the seed of Adam and Eve who by his victory has crushed that dragon’s head. The truth which Satan has wrapped into the lie is his own undoing. Jesus does love us. What he cannot abide is the rest of the statement.

He loves us despite ourselves. And that simple little “despite” suddenly empowers and frees us to be the people of God in this place.

I am not better than the unbeliever I speak to, in truth, I may stand in awe of the good that he has done in this community or the virtue which he exercises. On the other hand, I might honestly be repelled by what that other person has said or done. But I know that the love which Christ has shown to me in Jesus is the same love God has for him, despite him or her, just as it is despite me. It is Jew and Greek whom God loves, child of Abraham by birth and by faith, He is an utterly indiscriminate lover. He loves the person who gets it right, he loves the person who gets it wrong, so I can too.

Christ conquers my tempter today, the tempter who comes to us and would entrap us in our overweening pride. He rescues me today, and through my baptism, my touch with him, he has empowered my life to be a life which confesses his love for this whole world.

4. My father was a wandering Aramean, how am I going to settle down in heaven? (OT – That the Holy Spirit would move the hearer to anticipate with eagerness and longing the peace and joy of heaven.)

At first the sermon might seem like a no-brainer, but I think we have a fundamental failure of theological imagination at work. Our visions of heaven are often simply the idea that it is just like this, only more of it. But the children of Israel wandering for 40 years had never farmed, but Moses speaks to them about farming.

God leads us to a promised land as well, a land in which our tempter is powerless, a land in which the very thoughts of God are not alien to us but known and delightful to us. God leads us to a promised land, a Canaan which is as alien to our world right now as farming must have been to the wandering children of Abraham.

This sermon will serve to highlight how far we are from that land, and this will not be hard to point out. Every death, every sin, every hardship, every fright, every illness is a bitter reminder of sin’s depredations upon us. But don’t discount the fact that some of our people will wonder what they will be doing in heaven. They cannot even imagine it. This will also present a challenge to the preacher. Just like the desert wandering people of Israel probably wondered if they would even know how to farm, plant seeds, harvest grain, etc., when they got to Israel.

They figured it out, and the Gospel here might be simply the “When you get there....” The particulars will be impossible to say, except that you will enjoy and live fully in a way you cannot imagine. It won’t just be an eternal choir practice, I promise you that. There are mansions after all, we will get to go home and take a nap anytime you want ☺.

I think a lot of people expect to be really bored in heaven. It will be a sort of eternal worship service, long sermons, interminable hymns, and lots of praising going on. But this is not really what heaven is. Heaven is as hard to describe to you and me as farming

must have been to the wandering Jews. Paul says there will be love there, lots of love. That would suggest that we will be interacting with people, because love is never really an abstraction. We will talk, we will play, and we will do things. I really like what C. S. Lewis said about a world without end, not only eternally in time but also spatially, never without a new horizon to cross, a new adventure to live. You might read Lewis' "Great Divorce" for some material. It is a very brief book and has described heaven's edge most wonderfully.