

1st Sunday in Lent
February 26, 2023
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Matthew 4:1-11

A Champion for the Defeated

Matthew 4:1-11 (EHV)

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil. After he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The Tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread."

But Jesus answered, "It is written: Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God."

Then the Devil took him into the holy city. He placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, and he 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 they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."

Jesus said to him, "Again, it is written: You shall not test the Lord your God."

Again the Devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. He said to him, "I will give you all of these things, if you will bow down and worship me."

Then Jesus said to him, "Go away, Satan! For it is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."

Then the Devil left him, and just then angels came and served him.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Believe it or not, the presidential election season is upon us. Candidates and potential candidates are already visiting our state. Soon the pollsters will begin calling and knocking on doors. They often ask questions like: What are your biggest concerns? What is the greatest need for your family? What is the greatest need in our state or nation? Answers will cover things like the economy, education, environment, infrastructure, safety, and so on. The candidates will seek to give solutions to these greatest needs.

We are going to talk about our greatest needs during the Sundays in Lent as well as on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. The Bible gives us a different list of greatest needs. We need someone to battle the devil for us. We need someone to give us eternal life. We need the water of life and spiritual sight. One day we will need resurrection when we have died. We need Holy Communion to forgive our sins. We need a perfect sacrifice to pay for all sin. Our greatest needs are all met in Jesus. He is no politician. Jesus is our Savior. Today's reading focuses on Jesus as the Champion for the Defeated. He is just the champion we need.

Listen again to the three temptations of the devil recorded in the Gospel of Matthew.

The Tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread." ...Then the Devil took him into the holy city. He placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, and he 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 they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." ...Again the Devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms

of the world and their glory. He said to him, "I will give you all of these things, if you will bow down and worship me."

The first is a temptation to believe that the Father is not good to his Son. A good father feeds his children so why would God the Father let his own Son be hungry?

The second is a temptation to believe that God the Father does not care for his Son. Put the Father's love to the test. If he really loves you, he will miraculously prevent you from harm, even if you are trying to harm yourself. It is really an attack on God's Word. For the Father recently testified at the baptism of Christ that Jesus is his beloved Son. The Tempter is basically saying that the Father was lying, for no Father would treat his Son like this. Make God prove his Word if you really are the Son of God.

And the third is a crass temptation for the Son to sever his relationship with his Father to become the supreme ruler of this world. Your Father is holding you back, keeping you from being like him and ruling this earth.

Don't these temptations sound familiar? We already heard very similar temptations in the account Adam, Eve and the serpent in Genesis 3. The devil tempts Eve to think that God is not good. He's keeping you from eating all the good fruit in the garden. The devil tells Eve that God is lying to them. They won't surely die just from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And the devil tempts Eve to believe that severing her relationship with God will make her like God, giving her wisdom.

It is really amazing that the devil comes after Jesus with very similar temptations that he used on Adam and Eve some four millennia earlier. Hasn't the Tempter come up with any new tricks? Not really. And why would he? Those temptations worked on Adam and Eve. Think about that for a moment. Adam and Eve were created in the image of God. They were holy and righteous before the Lord. They had a perfect relationship with the Lord, their God. Their minds and wills were perfectly aligned with the Lord. Adam and Eve did not have any physical or mental or spiritual deficiencies. If any humans were to do battle with the Tempter and win, it would have been Adam and Eve.

"When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was appealing to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took some of its fruit and ate. She gave some also to her husband, who was with her, and he ate" (Genesis 3:6). The terrible fall into sin is recorded in this one verse. Just one verse and the devil's temptations took down not only Adam and Eve, but the entire human race. If they who were created in God's image could not defeat the devil, what chance do we who were born in the image of fallen Adam have? We are born defeated.

And we continue to be defeated by the Tempter. God tells us that we have been adopted into his family through baptism, that we are his sons and daughters. The Tempter tells us that God is lying to us. If we were really his sons and daughters, we would be more successful. We would have more money. We wouldn't have suffered that accident or illness. We wouldn't struggle if we were really the children of God. And too often we buy into the devil's lies. We fall into despair when life goes bad. We blame God, give up on God and believe that God is not being good to us.

The Tempter continues to put the kingdoms of the world in front of us. Maybe we are not offered an entire kingdom, but he may offer just a small piece. Just give up a small part of your time with God for this activity. Just give up a bit of your relationship with God for career or leisure or pleasure. We may not be tempted to completely sever our relationship with God and bow down to the devil, but all the devil has to get us to do is turn from the Lord a little bit. For when we put our earthly desires, pleasures and goals above the Lord and his Word, we are worshiping ourselves and that is exactly what the devil

wants. Oh, the Tempter doesn't need any new tricks. The old ones defeated our perfect parents in the Garden of Eden and those same old temptations still defeat us today.

One of our greatest needs is for a champion. We need one to step into the battle in our place, one to do what we could not. David was such a champion for the people of Israel. He stepped into battle against Goliath. If David wins, all his people win. If David loses, all his people lose. So it is with Christ as he steps into battle with the Tempter. If Christ wins, all who have been defeated by temptation win. If Christ loses, we are lost forever.

Adam and Eve were in a bountiful garden. They were healthy and could eat from the delicious fruit of the garden any time. They were as prepared as a human could be to face the devil's attacks. Jesus was in the wilderness. He was alone. Christ did not eat for forty days. He was weak and tired and hungry. This was the opportune time for the devil to strike. Or so he thought.

But Jesus is not tricked by the lies of the Tempter. Jesus does not doubt his Father's love for him or his Father's words to him...not for a moment. Jesus knows the Scriptures, trusts the Word of God and will not give the devil an opening to defeat him. Jesus defends himself against every attack:

"It is written: Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God...Again, it is written: You shall not test the Lord your God...Go away, Satan! For it is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."

When the battle is over, only one is left standing. He is the Son of God and the Son of Man. He is the only one who could stand in our place against Satan and win. He is our champion and his victory is ours.

But the Tempter hasn't stopped attacking God's people yet. So here is what we do until the day when Satan is thrown into the lake of burning sulfur forever. We fight. We battle. We resist. We learn and grow in God's Word so that we trust whatever our Lord tells us instead of falling for the lies of Satan. We struggle every day against temptations as if it all depends on us. And at the end of the day, we rest secure in knowing that it does not. For we have a champion in Christ. He won the victory in the wilderness. He continued to win the victory at the cross by paying for all sins so that Satan has nothing to accuse us of before God. Christ continued to defeat the devil by rising from the dead on the third day. And he will return one day to completely defeat the Tempter. So fight the good fight because our enemy has been and will be defeated by Christ. When we are defeated, it is only temporary, for Christ forgives us. The devil's defeat is certain and forever. Thanks be to Christ, our Champion!

Amen.