

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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First Sunday in Lent, March 13, 2011

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 40, 557:7-8, 437, 552:1-5, 552: 6-8.

Lessons: Psalm 91, 1 Corinthians 10:1-10, Matthew 4:1-11.

Sermon Text: Luke 4:1-13.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

You have just heard two of the three places in the Gospels where this event is recorded. Mark is very brief: ***“At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.”*** Mark 1:12-14.

The three major temptations Jesus faced immediately after his baptism were serious efforts by the devil to rob the world of its Redeemer. Satan had been successful in leading the first Adam into sin so that a Redeemer was necessary. Now he attacked Jesus Christ, whom scripture refers to as the second Adam, in an effort to frustrate God’s work of redemption.

Satan had been created as one of God’s holy angels, but now he was a wicked angel. He had rebelled against God and had been cast out of heaven together with many other wicked, disobedient angels who followed him in his rebellion. We do not know how or when this took place, nor can we explain why God permitted it to happen and then did not immediately utterly destroy Satan and his evil angels.

The important thing for us to remember is that God is still much wiser and more powerful than Satan, and Satan cannot overpower us as long as we place our trust in our Lord and Savior. The Greek word used in Matthew and Luke for the devil is *diabolos* (from which we get the English word diabolical). The meaning of this word is slanderer or liar. The devil is not just a clever liar or an habitual liar; he is a constant liar. He is the father of lies. He invented the very idea of lying and told the very first lie. He makes wonderful promises, as he did to Eve: ***“You will not surely die”***, Genesis 3:4, but he has never kept a single one of them, and he never will. If he does occasionally speak a few words of truth, he distorts them or misapplies them or takes them out of context or immediately proceeds to contradict them.

We know these things about the devil, yet we keep on falling for his lies. He tells us that life will be so much more enjoyable if we disobey God’s commandments. So he persuades us to lie and cheat and steal and commit sexual immorality, and he tells us there is nothing wrong with coveting and lust and filthy speech and misusing God’s name – as long as we don’t actually do something to harm someone else. His lies lead to all kinds of trouble and sorrow and grief and regrets. Yet he convinces people that in *their* case it will be different. But in every single case the devil’s promises are not intended for our good or benefit. His one and only goal is to make or keep people separate from God and to draw them into the eternal torments of hell with himself.

Today we are reminded that

THE WORD OF GOD IS THE WEAPON IN THE TEMPTATION OF JESUS

- 1. Spiritual food is more important than earthly food.**
- 2. The devil’s lies can only be overcome by the truth of God’s Word.**
- 3. The Lord God is the only one whom Jesus Christ will worship!**

When the tempter said to Jesus, ***“If you are the Son of God”*** this did not necessarily mean that he questioned that fact or that he imagined he could get Jesus to doubt the fact. Satan might simply have been suggesting: ‘since you are the Son of God, you don’t have to go hungry. I can give you a simple solution. Just

turn some of these desert stones into bread. The Israelites were fed with manna, miraculous food they picked off the ground in the wilderness, for 40 years. So there is no reason for you not to provide for yourself in this miraculous way.'

But there was a reason for Jesus to reject this suggestion. He was tempted to use his divine power to relieve his physical hunger and not to rely on the Father, who had already miraculously sustained him for 40 days. During his entire ministry, Jesus never once used his divine power for his personal benefit. His miracles were always for the benefit of others. He came to live in humiliation as a man among men, and that was the way he lived his entire earthly life.

Jesus' first recorded words after his baptism quote the written Word of God from Deuteronomy 8:3. God's chosen people were told: "***He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.***"

Jesus used the same sword of the Spirit – the Word of God! – that we have for dealing with temptations. He stated that obeying the Father was more important than getting food for his body. On another occasion Jesus told his disciples when they urged him to eat something "***My food... is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.***" John 4:34.

Look at the contrast between the temptation of Adam in Eden and this temptation of Christ in the desert. In both cases Satan used something to eat in his efforts to awaken distrust in God. He succeeded in Eden, a land of plenty, where there was no unsatisfied hunger. But he failed in the barren wilderness when Jesus was extremely hungry.

The temptations and sufferings that Jesus endured throughout his earthly life were greatly magnified versions of the trials we endure. Yet he never faltered, though we keep on falling into sin. He then willingly suffered the punishment we deserved for all our failures, and he gave us the credit and the blessings for all his successes. "***He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.***" Isaiah 53:5. He died so that we may live.

For the second great temptation, Satan took Jesus to the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem. This literally happened, even though we cannot explain exactly how it took place. It is also self-evident that Jesus went willingly, for Satan had only limited power, and he could not compel Jesus to do anything against his will. This highest point of the temple complex may have been on the east side overlooking the Kidron Valley. The secular historian Josephus tells us that the drop there was some 450 feet, and no one could possibly survive a fall like that – a football field and a half – without divine protection.

In this case Satan also quoted Scripture. It was as though he wanted to wrestle the sword of the Spirit from Jesus' hands and use it to attack him. He quoted words from our Old Testament lesson, Psalm 91. These words seemed to fit the situation exactly, and Satan was trying to tell Jesus that he would be demonstrating lack of trust in the Father if he did not accept this challenge. But Satan was subtly twisting God's promise. This is not a promise of unlimited angelic protection under all circumstances. It is rather an assurance of the Lord's protection while his people go about their God-given responsibilities from day to day. Martin Luther said, "If the devil does not succeed in robbing us of our confidence in God, he will go to the other extreme and try to make us cocksure and much too daring." To tempt God in such a way is not an act of faith. It rather is a demonstration of doubt.

One writer said "the first temptation was intended to produce distrust; the second, false trust." Jesus responded again by quoting Scripture – only he applied it correctly: "***Do not test the Lord your God as you did at Massah***" Deuteronomy 6:16. Massah means testing. There the Israelites had put the Lord to the test by demanding that he provide them with water. (Exodus 17:7) The people were almost ready to stone Moses because they did not have water for themselves and their livestock. Moses appealed to the Lord, and the Lord instructed him to take his staff and strike the rock at this place, also called Horeb. Immediately water gushed out and satisfied the thirst of all the people and their animals. The people had put God to the test by demanding a miracle that he had not promised them. All his previous miracles in connection with their journey out of Egypt

and through the Red Sea should have convinced the people that God could and would continue to provide for their needs. Their demands showed that they did not trust God. Instead, they tempted God.

Yet through the prophet Malachi, the Lord invites, almost challenges us, to put him to the test in another way. He says to us, ***“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the Lord almighty, ‘and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.’*** (Malachi 3:10).

The difference between the two situations is, of course, God’s clear command. He commands us to bring our generous offerings to him and promises that he will provide for us graciously and abundantly. When we confidently do as God says and boldly call upon him to keep his promises, we are not tempting God. We are exercising and expressing faith in him and his Word. This is pleasing to God.

After Satan’s first two temptations failed, he offered to make a deal with Jesus. In a way that is not explained and that we cannot understand, Satan took Jesus to a very high mountain, showed him all the kingdoms of the world and said, ***“All this I will give you... if you will bow down and worship me”***. Satan knew of the Father’s promise to the Son in the second Psalm: ***“Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.”*** Psalm 2:8. But Satan here claimed the authority of God the Father for himself, and he pretended that he was willing to make matters much easier for Jesus. Jesus would not have to suffer and die to redeem the world. He would only have to bow down and worship Satan once out in the desert where nobody else would even be aware of it – at least immediately. Of course, Satan was lying again. He could not have kept his word even if he wanted to. Satan’s proposition was nothing but clever lies from beginning to end. The shortcut that Satan offered to Jesus would have been a dead end.

What a tragedy it is that people still fall for Satan’s lies. He misleads all of us from time to time. In spite of our better knowledge, he convinces us that we’ll be better off, wealthier, happier, more successful, or feel good if we disobey God’s commandments and follow Satan’s suggestions. He loves to call our attention to people who have openly done exactly that and appear to have prospered, but he wants us to forget all about their eternal fate. It is alarming that there seems to be a growing number of people who actually worship Satan, displaying Satanic symbols, even calling themselves a ‘church’, and even offering him gruesome, bloody sacrifices, even if they are animal sacrifices. In that way they openly despise God’s grace in Jesus Christ and make themselves heirs of eternal damnation in hell.

In response to this third major temptation of the devil, Jesus again quoted the Word of God from Deuteronomy: ***“Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only”*** Deuteronomy 6:13. Then Satan left, to tempt Jesus at another time, ***“and angels came and attended him.”*** They undoubtedly brought him food and drink and, as messengers from the Father, spoke words of encouragement to Jesus.

But Satan did not give up. He kept looking for opportunities to attack. When Jesus spoke to his disciples about his impending suffering and death, for example, Peter rebuked Jesus and insisted that such things must never happen. Peter did not realize it, but he was talking just like Satan, and Jesus clearly told him so. ***“Jesus ...said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me’”*** Matthew 16:23. We are also told that Satan entered into Judas Iscariot before he went out into the darkness to betray Jesus into the hands of his enemies. Peter repented of his sin of rebuking Jesus and later of his sins of denying Jesus three times, but Judas despaired of being forgiven, took his own life, and threw himself into eternal damnation in hell. Hell is the fate of all who succumb to the vicious lies of Satan.

We need to remember that Satan will try to deceive us as long as we live and especially in the hour of our death; but with the power of the Word of God, the sword of the Spirit, we can drive him off and remain safe with our Savior for eternity.

God’s words worked for Jesus. They will work for us. Amen.