

## Lent 1 (2024)

The weather this past week was exceptional. I hope you were able to get out and enjoy the sun and mild temperatures.

I can't remember which day now, but on one of these days, I and a friend went on a 5.7-mile mountain hike.

As you can imagine there were many ups and downs. You ascend and descend, often in quick succession.

If you think about it, that is the way life is. There are highs and lows, often one follows the other very quickly.

It was true in the life of Jesus.

He had been on one of those highs at His baptism. There, He had received confirmation from His Father in Heaven that He was on the

right track. He had not mistook His messianic calling.

A voice was heard from heaven proclaiming, **“This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”**

Then, almost immediately – in today’s passage -- we find Him being led up of the Spirit to go into the desert and to do battle with the great Tempter.

By Tempter, I mean the same one who deceived Adam . . . laid many snares for the children of Israel both as they made their way towards and arrived in the Promised Land . . . the one who seeks daily to destroy our peace and wreak havoc in our lives.

Before I go further, I should probably say a word about the phrase **“Led up of the Spirit to be tempted of the devil.”**

We should not interpret these words to mean that *God* tempts people to do evil. The devil does that. But God does *allow* His children to pass through various challenges and tests. Why?

Certainly not to defeat them; rather to make them strong.

Think of the Old Testament character Joseph, the boy with the technicolor coat. He was sold into slavery by his brothers, falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and thrown into prison and left there for quite some time.

I am using my imagination now, but I would not be surprised if during his time in prison that the Tempter did not come often and whisper: **“God has abandoned you. Give up your trust in Him.”**

Joseph did not do that. Instead, quoting the Psalmist, **“Iron entered into his soul”** (Psalm 105:18).

The same can be our experience. Instead of the tests of life, including temptations coming from the sulfuric pit below, defeating and destroying us, these can make us strong.

We pray that we may be delivered from evil and may come through those trials stronger, better men and women. We pray that iron may enter into our soul.

In Jesus' case, the temptations He faced had an additional purpose. They made it possible for Him to be the **sympathizing** Saviour of men and women. He really, really understands our plight because He has walked in our moccasins. Think about it.

--Tempted to allow bodily needs to take center stage and to become an occasion for sin.

--Tempted to misuse God's promises and misapply scripture.

--Tempted to achieve some great purpose using illegitimate means.

Jesus faced all of these and a multitude of other temptations about which we are not told.

And here is the takeaway. We can come to Him in complete confidence knowing He not only cares but **empathizes**. The writer of Hebrews put it like this:

**“For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.”**

What temptations do you face? Make a list, and then says: “Jesus has been here. He understands. I will seek His strength.”

But there is more. The temptation of Christ links Jesus’ story with the grand narrative of the Bible.

Let's begin with the Adam story. What happened to the progeniture of the human race? /// He faced temptation and failed the test, just as did his wife Eve before him.

Because He failed the test, sin and evil and death came into the world . . . at least that is how Paul explains the predicament we humans find ourselves in. **“For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners,”** Paul writes in Romans 5:9.

Adam was tempted and succumbed. Jesus, the second head of the human race, was tempted and succeeds.

Moreover, His victory can be ours. That's the good news. Don't despair, trust God. Be led of the Spirit.

But there is more. Jesus going into the desert and being tempted of the devil is also a retelling of the Israel story, and this time getting it right.

Remember what happened as the Israelites made their 40-year trek through the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land.

Again and again, they failed the test. They succumbed to temptation. They doubted God's care. They worshiped a sorry substitute – a golden calf. They murmured.

Jesus, during His 40 days in the desert, turns the tables. He stays on course. He is the successful Israel.

The vocation given to Israel, going all the way back to Abraham, was to bring healing, rescue, blessing to all the families of the earth.

Abraham's offspring as a whole were incapable of doing this. Jesus, the representative Israelite, the true Israelite, is. He succeeds where Israel as a whole failed.

That is what I mean when I say the temptations of Christ follow and track with the larger of narrative of the Bible.

What this means to us is that Bible is more than a collection of stories. All those stories go together to form a uniform narrative and lead to Christ. The Bible is God's story and our story.

Before I close, there are two other 'take-aways' from today's Gospel that we should consider. Both are very practical in nature.

The first is that in the temptation of Christ we are reminded of our vulnerability and of our need to stay on guard. If the Tempter came to Jesus, he will certainly come to us.

Therefore, we should not be surprised when we find thoughts we truly hate and know are wrong coming into our mind.



Nor should we think that we are not real Christians when this happens. That, my friends, is a ploy of the devil, a voice straight from hell.

Don't allow the Tempter to take you down that false path. Keep your focus on God and His goodness and love. Take command of bad thoughts and command them to leave.

That is exactly what Martin Luther, the great German reformer of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, did.

On at least one occasion in Wittenburg Castle he threw some ink at what he perceived as personified evil. The stain of that ink can still be seen on the wall today.

How did Luther stay on track and not get diverted? One device he used was, upon arising, to sign himself with the cross and say, "I am a baptized man."

The Tempter tries to destroy our confidence and obfuscate our identity in Christ.

Who are you? Who am I? /// Only one answer will do: Children of God and inheritors of the Kingdom of Heaven.

If you hear any voice in your head saying anything else, say: “Get thee hence Satan!”

But there is one more practical application, and with it I close. Jesus shows us how to meet temptation. He shows us what weapon to use against it.

Three times He was tempted and three times He met temptation with the words “It is written.”

When I was boy in Vacation Bible School, I learned a verse I have never forgotten: **“Thy word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against thee”** (Psalm 119:11).

Knowing scripture enables us to overcome temptation. It is our chief weapon. It is for this reason we need to pay attention when it is read in church and to read it at home.

But we need to read it wisely. We mustn't pull out little snippets to suit our purposes. That is what Satan did. How do we read scripture aright? /// I will tell you.

**Briefly, it is to read the part in light of the whole and all in light of Christ.**

Read scripture in this manner and you won't go wrong. You will have a mighty weapon at your disposal. ///

In closing – mountain trails, as well as life, have many ups and downs. These ups and downs often come in quick succession, just as they did in Jesus' life. The exhilaration of hearing God's voice from heaven was quickly followed by hearing Satan's voice from hell.

The good news is that in spite of these ups and downs we can have victory . . . make a difference in the here-and-now and in the end arrive in God's own country.

We have the Spirit to lead us and the Scriptures as a club to beat off the enemies of soul and body.

What more do we require? Let us continue our hike, confident we are well equipped and don't walk alone.