

**Luke 4:1-13 ~ Sunday, February 21, 2010**

With the start of the season of Lent, you'll occasionally hear people talk about "giving something up for Lent." The essence of that idea is to imitate Christ who fasted, who gave up eating, for 40 days in the wilderness. In the Sundays of this Lenten season we'll be looking at several things that God doesn't want you to give up for Lent, seven things the Lord wants you to take with you this Lent (and every day of every year).

In this morning's Gospel we hear about how Jesus gave up eating for 40 days in the wilderness. But even more importantly we hear of how Jesus was victorious over Satan's temptations. That's the first thing that the Lord would have us take with us throughout Lent and throughout life is: VICTORY over Satan.

Victory over Satan though isn't some quick process to whoop up on the devil in three rounds and after that one great showdown you can live without ever being troubled by him again. The opening verses of today's Gospel bring the nature of this battle into sharp focus: "**Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil**" (vv. 1-2). If the Son of God in human flesh was tempted by Satan constantly, do you think he'll be any less frequent or less determined when it comes to tempting you?

Notice also that the Scriptures say of Jesus that he was "**led by the Spirit**" into this battle. This was not an evil spirit leading Jesus. This was the Holy Spirit, marching Jesus into the battle field of temptation out in this wilderness to defeat Satan. Jesus won that victory by resisting Satan's every temptation so that he never fell into sin, not only this wilderness but throughout his entire life on earth. Jesus won another great victory over Satan at the end of his earthly life in a different wilderness, the one known as the cross, where separated from the Father, Jesus faced the punishment for every temptation of Satan that we have ever fallen for.

Through God's Word the Holy Spirit leads us to Jesus and his cross – where the Spirit joins us to Jesus in victory. Our victory over Satan and his temptations isn't accomplished by our own might. No, it's given to us, by the Holy Spirit who gives us faith, by Jesus who speaks this word from the cross, "**It is finished.**" While Satan cannot undo Jesus' victory, he does seek for opportune ways to talk us out of holding onto Christ's victory by faith. He tries to get us to question, doubt, and disbelieve God's promises. That's Satan's ultimate purpose in putting temptation before us – not only to trip us up in holy living, but especially to drive a division between us and God with deceit, lies, and trickery, enticing us to turn away from faith in God's promises.

Satan knows what buttons to push in human hearts, what temptations, what traps to place that will give him the greatest chance of achieving his goal. Satan often waits for moments of vulnerability or potential weakness to make his move. He came to Jesus after Jesus has been fasting for forty days. "**If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.**" Can't you just imagine Jesus' mouth starting to salivate as he thought about a piece of freshly baked bread, maybe drizzled with some melted butter after forty days of no meals?

And what's the big deal with this temptation anyway? Jesus certainly had the power. And eating bread isn't a sin. Why not just one small loaf? Because it would have meant turning away from fully and completely trusting his Father's promise to provide for all his needs.

How often we face this same type of temptation today! No matter how much or little we may have, each of us is susceptible to falling into the trap of allowing worry about physical needs to uproot our trust in God's promises. It may take the form of food, or clothing, or a home, or family and friends, or a job, health, appearance, a sport or hobby, or all these and more. Whenever the cares and concerns of the world begin to shake your confidence in the promises of God, Satan has you in the trap.

How did Jesus handle this type of temptation? He sent the devil packing by quoting from the Bible. "**It is written; 'Man does not live on bread alone.'**" The rest of that quote from Deuteronomy says, "**But by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.**" Moses originally spoke those words to the children of Israel after their exodus from Egypt as they were about to enter the Promised Land. He was reminding them of how they had just spent the last forty years in the wilderness, being fed every day on bread that fell from heaven, to learn that real victory is not about having all that earth can offer but holding firmly to all that God promises because God always keeps his promises. God wants us to trust in His Word and turn to his promises for help at all times. When Satan came tempting Jesus to doubt the Father's desire and ability to take care of him – Jesus wards off that attack by quoting the clear promises of God.

Satan does not give up easy. He leads Jesus up to a high place and shows him all the kingdoms of the world in an instant. And then he makes his offer. "Your Father promises you glory...but he's got a cross waiting for you. He promises you power...but first humiliation, mockery, pain, and death. I have a better plan, an easier way, no pain, all gain, a shortcut to victory, all the glory with little or no work." Sounds pretty tempting doesn't it? That's no doubt why the devil said to Jesus, "***I will give you all the authority and splendor [of the kingdoms of the world]. So if you worship me, it will all be yours.***"

Satan still challenges us: "Take up your cross and follow Jesus. Deny yourself. Is that what you really want in your life? Do you want to live out your vocation in tension, pain, and anguish, living for God?" Satan is a master salesman as he pitches his seemingly attractive alternative. He invites us to lay down our cross and forget about following Jesus and his eternal victory in exchange for the instant appearance of victory here and now with all kinds of shortcuts to earthly success. Never mind that they are typically immoral or unethical or temporary. Better to have 15 minutes of fame than to live a lifetime under the cross and its painful crucifixion of the flesh and all of its sinful, selfish desires, right?

The devil is good at what he does, isn't he? But Jesus is even better at what he does—fighting the devil for us. Jesus answered, "***It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'***" Why is that written? So that we don't fall for the devil's deceits and forget that trust in God and his promises is the only way to have what truly matters, what really lasts, in this life and the next.

Satan isn't done though. He realizes he can't get Jesus to quit trusting God's promises, so instead he tries to use that trust as a temptation to sin! From the highest point of the temple the devil says, "***If you are the Son of God throw yourself down from here. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully.'***"

It reveals something of Satan's evil genius that he is able to take a promise of God and twist it into a temptation to sin. Satan intentionally twists the meaning of that Psalm. In Psalm 91 God is assuring his people that He will always be with them and protect them even when He must lead them through dangerous and perilous circumstances. In no way does God intend that promise to be an invitation to recklessly put yourself into harm's way as a way of showing off just how much you trust God.

I can ask God to take care of me, but I cannot expect him to be part of something that is contrary to his will for my life or something that I have devised that is evil. For Jesus to stand at the top of the temple, jump down, be rescued by angels like some kind of carnival trick in order to receive the "oohs and ahhs" and applause of the crowd would have been contrary to God's will and God's plan. Once again Jesus sends the devil packing with the words of Scripture, "***Do not put the Lord your God to the test.***"

The devil tempted Jesus three times. Yet each time the Lord was armed with the written Word. The Word of God is our sure defense against the devil's assaults on our faith too. That's what Martin Luther was talking about when he wrote in the hymn we just sang: "Though devils all the world should fill, All eager to devour us, We tremble not, we fear no ill, They shall not overpower us. This world's prince may still / Scowl fierce as he will, He can harm us none, He's judged; the deed is done; One little word can fell him" (CW 201:3). Yes, one little word can fell the devil. One little word from the mouth of God has felled the devil, it's the single Greek word that our Lord spoke from his cross, that word which translated into English means, "***It is finished.***" With this one, little Word God announces our victory over the devil. With this one, little word, God unconditionally assures you that your Savior has taken your punishment for every time you have fallen for a temptation of Satan. With this one little word, Jesus assures you that you can trust every promise of God...because God always keeps his promises to you. Take this Word of God, all of it...take it with you throughout Lent, take it with you throughout life and you will be victorious over Satan. Amen.