

+ Luke 4:1-13 + Journey to the Cross: A Field of Battle + 1st Sunday in Lent + 24 February 2010 +

Over the years I've had opportunity to visit a number of American battlefields. Some played an important role in the history of America, places like Vicksburg in Mississippi, Yorktown in Virginia, Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts, and Little Bighorn out in Montana. Others didn't play an important role in American history, but were important for other reasons like my family history, places like Bentonville and Averasboro in North Carolina.

No matter the significance or location of the battlefield, visiting those fields can often be a breathtaking experience. When you get a chance to walk the field, it starts to sink in. Men fought and died here. Blood was shed. The fighting was particularly fierce over there. On this outcropping a unit withstood repeated attacks against all odds and held the line. Here an ordinary soldier became a hero. There someone was cut down in the heat of battle. On a battlefield, amidst blood and bullets and smoke, the history of people and nations changed, with the outcomes even affecting us today.

During the Sundays in this season of Lent, we will be making stops with Jesus along his journey to the cross of Calvary. Our first stop on this journey is **A FIELD OF BATTLE** out in the Judean wilderness. There we recall how Christ fiercely and successfully fought off the attacks of Satan.

So how did we get here in the first place? The war that led to this wilderness battle started in a beautiful garden that God had created especially for our first parents, Adam and Eve. Oh, it was a gorgeous place with fruit of every kind available to them, but all that was ruined when Satan ambushed Adam and Eve. God had commanded them not to eat from one tree in the garden—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This was to be their act of obedience and worship, but Satan used that tree to make a sneak attack. Satan questioned the reliability of God and his Word. ***“Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”*** He offered the possibility of being like God, ***“For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”*** He made the fruit look ***“pleasing to the eye”***.

Our first parents should've known better, but they fell for Satan's tricks and ate from the tree. Suddenly everything got very complicated. Shame over what they had done and had become filled their hearts and minds. Blame flowed from their lips. Fear, heartache and death suddenly became a reality to people who had never known such awful things. They quickly realized they had traded holy freedom for oppressive slavery. As quickly as it began, the battle was lost, but a war had begun. Later God promised as he spoke to Satan, ***“And I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”*** A Hero was coming who would crush the serpent's head and win the victory for a world enslaved to sin. Freedom would come!

Centuries passed. Satan won victory after victory as every child, conceived and born in sin, was crushed under his oppression as St., Paul explains, ***“Just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned...”*** Yes, Satan won countless battles, but victory still belonged to the Lord as souls were saved looking forward to the arrival of God's Hero, and arrive he did.

A long-promised baby, conceived by the Holy Spirit and named Jesus, was born to a virgin in a Bethlehem stable. At the age of thirty, he was baptized by John the Baptizer and anointed with the Holy Spirit at the Jordan River. There God publicly announced that Jesus was not only his beloved Son, but his chosen Savior. The long, final drive to complete victory had begun.

With his centuries-long war with Satan finally coming to a head, ***“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert...”*** Out there in the wilderness Jesus was all alone. No band of disciples to follow him. No eager crowds hanging on his every word, but during those forty days out in the barren wilderness, Jesus was under almost constant attack. ***“...For forty days he was tempted by the devil.”***

Out in the desert, Jesus spent time in prayer and fasting. We're told, ***“He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.”*** With each passing day as Jesus grew hungrier, Satan ramped up his attacks. He hoped to destroy God's plan of salvation forever. The enemy knew Jesus was true man and thought he could overpower Jesus, but the devil sorely underestimated the Son of God. After all, Jesus had come out there to face and fight Satan. The fighting was going to be fierce.

Near the end of the forty days, Satan pounced on a physically weakened Jesus. He attacked Jesus where he was weakest—his physical hunger. ***“The devil said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.’”*** That would be easy enough, wouldn't it? After all, Jesus was the almighty Son of God. Surely the hunger in Jesus' stomach gnawed at his resolve, but to give in to Satan for mere bread would've been a self-centered lack of trust that his Father would provide. Jesus fought back with complete trust in his Father to keep his body and life. He swiftly and successfully repelled Satan's attack with the sword of the Spirit—the Word of God. ***“It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone.’”***

The battle shifted to Jerusalem at the highest point of the temple. Satan attacked again. ***“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; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”*** There at that holy place, Satan tried to do his unholy work, twisting the Word of God to get Jesus to prove his trust in his Father’s care by leaping off the highest point of the temple into the deep valley below. By doing so, Jesus would’ve tested God to act against his holy will. Jesus once again fought off the attack with the sword of the Spirit. ***“It says: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”***

The battle was turning against Satan, so he took Jesus ***“up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.”*** He lied through his teeth. ***“I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours.”*** It was a brazen attack on the God who already possessed all those things, but the attack wilted before Christ, who drove him away with the Word. ***“It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”*** The battle was won, but the war would continue.

As we gaze out at our Lord’s field of battle, we need to remember why the fighting was so fierce. This was a battle for our souls, which we could never win on our own. Daily we face the same attacks and lose the same battles as our first parents. Daily we’re tempted to think God and his promises really aren’t reliable. Look around and see all that seems to contradict God’s reliability. There’s war, recession, rampant immorality, the breaking-up of families and the list goes on. Our sinful natures attack from within as Satan whispers lies into our ears. “Did God really promise to provide all you need?” “Did God really promise to wipe your tears away?” “Does God really want you to serve him with your whole life?” “Are you sure God means what he says?” Satan works those areas of weakness you know so well. He makes temptation look tasty, but how often don’t you and I look back with regret and guilt at those past sins that only eat at our consciences? On our own, the war would be lost. That’s why we needed Christ, our Hero, to bring victory.

His perfect obedience to the heavenly Father was just the start. To win the victory, Jesus had to make the ultimate sacrifice for us. On the cross, Jesus endured the blast of God’s eternal condemnation. On the cross, Jesus suffered all the torment and wrath and separation from God’s love that we deserved, so we could have a life free from Satan’s terror for all eternity. In the empty tomb, Jesus sealed his victory for us over sin, Satan, and death

Because Jesus was victorious, God now looks at you and me differently. We’re no longer his hated enemies. We’re his beloved children. Christ’s victory means we have peace from the guilt of sins that trouble our hearts. We can leave that burden at the foot of our Savior’s cross, where he takes our guilt and places it on himself. That victory means freedom from worry, doubt, and fear. By faith we trust in the 100% reliability of God’s promises in his Word, because God kept his promise to send a Hero to save us.

Even though Christ has liberated us, we still need his protection. Even though Satan lies crushed in the dust, he still tries to sabotage our faith and ruin us eternally. Out of love for us, Jesus protects us from the enemies he’s already defeated. Jesus explains in John 10, ***“I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.”***

Through Baptism he connected us to his victories at Calvary and the empty tomb. He now gives us the sword of the Spirit to fend off the old, evil foe. We become skilled at using the Word through regular use of that Word in worship, Bible study, and personal devotions. With Christ’s help, we can face the daily onslaught of Satan’s attacks. In the end, we will stand victoriously by our Savior’s side. One day we will enjoy that victory in full in life eternal, where there is only peace and joy and freedom with our Savior.

It’s time for our journey to continue. The fighting was fierce on this field of battle, but victory is assured. Even as you daily face temptation, you can be confident that you have the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Martin Luther put it so beautifully, ***“The Word they still shall let remain, nor any thanks have for it; He’s by our side upon the plain with his good gifts and Spirit. And do what they will—hate, steal, hurt, or kill—though all may be gone, our victory is won; The kingdom’s ours forever!”*** Amen.