

**+ Matthew 4:1-11 + This Sequel Is Better Than the Original + 1st Sunday in Lent + 9 March 2014 +**

I've always appreciated a good movie. I once made an attempt to work through a list of the American Film Institute's top 100 films of all time. Now not all of those movies were worthy of being a "Top 100 film of all time", but when a good story is told visually, with great acting, excellent dialogue, and top-notch cinematography, movies like that tend to join the ranks of the great movies whether in their genre or even all time.

Often a movie like that becomes a "blockbuster" making tons of money for the movie studio and making stars out of all involved. Some even win Academy Awards, but even if they don't, studios often want to cash in on the success of the original movie. So what do they do? They make a sequel. The studio tries to catch lightning in a bottle for the second time, but in many cases, the sequel just isn't as good. The cast and crew are different. The studio cares less about quality. The writing isn't as good. Maybe the original should have never had a sequel in the first place.

Often a sequel is nothing more than a plot like the last movie with similar jokes or special effects. It's alright, but not the same. Sometimes the sequel is just as good as the original because it artfully continues the story arc. Yet every great once in a while a rare sequel comes along that's actually better than the original. With better acting or better direction or a stronger plot or better effects, the sequel outshines the original movie. Because this happens so rarely, sequels like *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Toy Story 2*, and *The Godfather II* have a special place in cinematic history.

This morning we have an opportunity to see a sequel that far outshines the original. It's a story about a war that started shortly after the creation of the world. On Ash Wednesday (and a few minutes ago), we got to see the original story of Genesis 3—of the tragic battle between Satan and Adam in the Garden of Eden. We saw the panoramic beauty of God's perfect creation. We saw the peaceful relationship between the holy God and his beloved humanity, but then we saw that pristine beauty and perfection transform into a tragedy of death and desolation. We saw Satan attack Adam and Eve with lies and deception until they found themselves shamefully running away from their loving God. We saw Adam and Eve turn on God and one another blaming God for their total defeat and that of everyone else after then.

Thankfully, the story didn't end there, but the Lord of grace unexpectedly transformed defeat into the promise of final victory. The Lord turned on Satan and declared that he would send a Savior descended from the woman who would eventually crush the serpent's head. Yes, the serpent would attack this coming Champion and even take his life, but victory over sin and Satan and death would be guaranteed.

This promise of the coming Savior gave Adam and Eve new hope, but the war went on. The battles against humanity and against the holy God became fierce with many falling over the centuries that followed. Many were lost forever condemned to an eternity in hell, but the promise—fleshed out by the Old Testament prophets—sustained God's faithful people as they looked ahead to the coming of God's great Champion.

The original story of God's promises to his struggling, hurting, guilty people in the Old Testament is an amazing account truly worthy of blockbuster status, but there's something missing. The people were always waiting for the Champion. They waited for generations without seeing him. There was always hope, but no one knew when he would come to fight the final battle. They just knew he was coming.

Today, however, we finally get to see the sequel. The scene opens with an adult Jesus stepping out of the Jordan River, water dripping from his hair. A dove flies near him while a voice thunders from heaven, **"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."** (Matthew 3:17) God the Father had just acknowledged publicly that this Jesus was also the Son of God—God's chosen Champion who had finally arrived on the scene. God had made this very clear well before Jesus' Baptism all the way back when angels proclaimed peace and reconciliation with God to the shepherds on Christmas night, but now it was public news. The Champion had arrived.

Behind him the Jordan River snaked down the valley. Before him was the desert—God's chosen field of battle where his Champion would fight Satan, the old evil foe. The epic battle in the desert took forty days and forty nights, but we leap ahead to what happened at the end. You see, Jesus had been fasting for those forty days and forty nights. By the end of those forty days, Jesus was naturally very hungry. His strength was sapped and Satan saw an opportunity to ambush the Son of God when he was weak.

**"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread."** At first glance, it doesn't seem like much of an attack. We might even wonder, "Satan, is that really all you've got?", but the attack was more

subtle than that. With one temptation, Satan attacked Jesus' human nature speaking to his great hunger. Yet at the same time, he attacked Jesus' divine nature as true God. **"If you are the Son of God..."** "Had not God the Father just declared that publicly at your Baptism? Why not prove it, Jesus, and satisfy your hunger at the same time?" It was all so simple.

With this subtle attack, Satan tried to get the Son of God to misuse his power with a thoughtless action in an attempt to relieve his short-term physical hunger. Jesus would end up relying on himself rather than on the care of his heavenly Father who had sustained him for the past forty days. Jesus would end up putting his personal needs ahead of God's will.

When tempted to help themselves, Adam and Eve failed just like every one of us ever since, but Jesus was God's promised Champion and he saw through Satan's subtlety. Wielding the sword of the Spirit—the Word of God, Jesus responded, **"It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"** It was more important to trust God and his will than to feed himself. Unlike Eden where Adam and Eve fell even though they had plenty of food, Jesus defeated Satan in the desert where he suffered from extreme hunger, but the battle had just begun.

Satan took Jesus to the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem. This highest point of the temple towered over a valley 450 feet below. With the last temptation, Satan had tried to make Jesus doubt God's care. Now he tried the other extreme—false trust in God's care. Again he questioned Jesus' divine nature and egged him on to prove it. **"If you are the Son of God...throw yourself down."** Knowing how Jesus had defended himself, Satan threw in his own corrupted version of Scripture for extra effect. **"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.'"** Satan tried to use Jesus' weapon against him. He wanted Jesus to be so overconfident in God's care that he would foolishly do something that would result in injury or death or even a fall from grace.

In spite of the devil's hopes, the attack was bound for failure as soon as he picked up the sword of the Spirit. When Satan twisted God's words in the garden, Adam and Eve failed as have every one of us ever since, but Jesus was God's promised Champion properly wielding the sword of the Spirit. **"Again, it is written, 'You shall not test the Lord your God.'"** God had not promised such unlimited care and Jesus wasn't about to be so foolish as to test the holy God, but the battle still wasn't over.

The devil took Jesus to the top of a very high mountain and allowed him to see all the wealth and glory and splendor of the kingdoms of this world. What a sight to behold, but then Satan went in for the kill with a bold-faced lie. It had worked with Adam and Eve. He had promised that they could be like God if they ate the fruit. Of course, Adam and Eve didn't become like God, and Satan didn't have the world to give to Jesus either. Foolishly Satan hoped his lie could get Jesus to worship him rather than do his Father's will. **"All this I will give you...if you will bow down and worship me."**

Satan never had a chance. Jesus looked the devil in the eye, and with the Word of God, he demonstrated why he was God's holy and undefeated Champion! **"Go away, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"** Satan had to leave. His lie disintegrated in the presence of God's holy Word. So he slinked off into the shadows making plans to attack the Son of God at another time. He would do so time and again through enemies and friends until Jesus gave up his life on the cross with a cry of victory, **"It is finished"**. Three days later God's Champion would walk away from his empty tomb.

Unlike the movies, this wasn't just a great story with an intriguing plot and rapid-fire dialogue, with good actors and impressive special effects. This actually happened and the Lord had Matthew and Luke record this for our benefit and blessing even 2,000 years after it happened.

You see, every day you and I face temptations just like these—and you know what? You fail miserably. So do I. Every day our lives are like a replay of the account of Adam and Eve. You doubt God's Word and will. You put your needs, your wants, your priorities before God. You buy into the bold-faced lie that promises that you can be like God or have what God has if you just do what Satan or your sinful nature or this sinful world tells you to do. You foolishly test God with little regard for the future or for the probable consequences of your actions. You willingly sacrifice everything, even your Christian faith, to satisfy the longings of your sinful heart, and you fail. You get soundly defeated by a demon far smarter and stronger than you are.

...But the account of Jesus' temptation isn't just about fighting harder and smarter against temptation. It's about what Jesus did for you, how Jesus was your Substitute, who made himself nothing, who endured strength-sapping struggles against temptation, who finally defeated Satan for your sake, who freed you from

the power of sin, Satan, and death. God wants you to know that Christ's temptation in the desert was like yours in every way, with one exception—he was without sin. That's why this sequel is better than the original. Jesus, our Champion, came away from the fight with total victory, with forgiveness and reconciliation and the declaration that we are now innocent in the sight of the holy God.

Jesus left that desert refreshed by the angels after a hard-fought battle, yet victorious for you and me. Now you're part of the sequel. What Jesus did became yours through the waters of Holy Baptism. There Jesus changed your life, and through those waters connected with the Word, he gave you his forgiveness, strength for this life to fight off temptation, and the promise of eternal rescue in heaven. This sequel is better because you have in Jesus the reality of the promise God made so many centuries ago. This sequel is better because it ends with Christ for you and me. I hope you don't ever get tired of this sequel or consider it boring or old-fashioned, because it's real and it's about you, but above all, it's about Jesus who won the battle and the war for you. Amen.