

**+ Matthew 4:1-11 + Fix Your Eyes on Jesus—The Righteous Victor! +
+ 1st Sunday in Lent + Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + 5 March 2017 +**

It had seemed almost too easy in the Garden. All the Father of Lies had to do was sow a little doubt in Eve and Adam's minds. ***"Did God really say...?"*** (Genesis 3:1) Then follow Eve's response with the 1-2 punch of a confident lie and a baseless promise of access to some vague thing that God wouldn't let them have—and next thing you know, creation was ruined. Oh, how Satan had rejoiced—albeit briefly—when guilt and shame and fear and blame rolled over Adam and Eve like the storm surge of a hurricane!

Oh, how Satan hated the holy God! He didn't want to serve God or his precious humanity. He wanted to have all the power and control himself. He convinced other angels to be dissatisfied with God too. So they rebelled and God cast them out of heaven and into hell—a place of eternal misery, death, and separation from the love of God. Although Satan was put in check, he hated the holy God so much that he wanted to ruin not just God's perfect creation, but those human beings for whom God had created all things.

They were so perfect. They reflected the image of God in every selfless thought, every loving action, and every encouraging word. Now God had given them a single command—just one. ***"You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die."*** (Genesis 2:16-17) As blinded by the foolishness of sin and hatred for God as he was, Satan knew that God wasn't trying to tempt them to sin. No, he was giving Adam and Eve the opportunity to show their love for him willingly and unforced. Satan would have to deceive and outwit them for their disobedience, but twisting God's good creation into something evil was the devil's specialty. Sin entered the world through Adam and infected all people and all creation. Adam's sin opened the door to death, which also meant that people could be sent to hell too.

...And so it went. The children of Adam and Eve did not reflect the image of God, but instead inherited the filthy sinful natures of their parents, which they passed on to their children and to their children. People didn't just rebel against God. They rejected him and lost their understanding of the true God. They worshiped created things or even themselves. They embraced their friendship with Satan and their sinful natures. Satan was even able to get God's followers to fall into sin. He knew how to turn their sinful natures against them and how to use their weaknesses against them. Perhaps you recall the sins of Noah and Abraham and Jacob and Moses and David and Solomon. Every one of those "heroes of faith" sinned and so did everyone else. Yet try as he might, Satan could never catch the holy God off guard.

Satan's loudest cackles always seemed to get cut short. While he rejoiced that humanity had fallen into sin, the Lord of free and faithful grace looked Satan in the eye and said, ***"...I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."*** (Genesis 3:15) It wasn't just a threat. It was an ironclad warning to the Father of Lies. One day a Savior would come who would crush Satan's serpent head and destroy the awful friendship he had just created with humanity. Since Satan is an angel, he isn't all-knowing, but that didn't stop him from trying to do everything he could to prevent that promise.

Walk through the Old Testament and see how close the golden line of the Savior came to being cut forever. The number of believers dwindled down to eight at the time of Noah. The foolish and selfish decisions of individuals like Abraham and Judah and David, endangered the Savior's line. Kings and kingdoms, rulers and empires threatened to wipe out the Savior's line and the people from which he would come, but always the Lord saved his people. Always the Lord protected and preserved the Savior's line. The Lord smacked his foolish believers upside the head with his Law and called them to repent, to turn from their sins and live—and they did.

Oh, how that frustrated Satan! No matter how hard he tried, no matter what plan he devised, no matter how cleverly he turned the sinful natures of God's people and their enemies, the Lord of grace always prevailed. The holy God always prevailed even when he allowed pagan empires to wipe out the Israelite kingdoms and haul his people off into exile. Even then, the Lord prevailed returning a remnant of his people back to Israel, but then 400 years of silence followed. Kingdoms rose and fell—and God's people waited. Satan also waited for the time when he could destroy the One sent to crush his head.

When the Child of Promise arrived, Satan recognized his enemy. He worked through wicked King Herod to try to snuff out the life of little Jesus, whose name meant "Savior." The first thirty years of Jesus' life were rather uneventful, but then Jesus was baptized—not for his own sins, but ***"to fulfill all righteousness"*** as the substitute for sinful humanity and to begin in a very public way his public ministry. (Matthew 2:15) God the Father himself declared Jesus to be his Son, his chosen one. Satan wasted no time launching his attack.

From the Jordan River, Jesus went into the dry, desolate region of the Judean desert and spent 40 days there facing temptation after temptation. He fasted during those weeks only drinking water. As time went on, he became physically weaker. God had taken on human flesh and allowed himself to endure the mortal weaknesses of being a human being. Satan saw his opportunity to ruin God's plan and the Savior of the world once and for all.

Near the end of those forty days, Satan blitzed Jesus with three great temptations. Recognizing that Jesus was as fully human as he was fully God, Satan went back to his Garden of Eden tactical guide and drew up a strategy. **"After fasting forty days and forty nights, Jesus was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.'"** A little doubt had set Adam and Eve down the path to destruction. Perhaps that little word **"if"** could do the job with Jesus. Of course, Jesus was the Son of God, but he had also spent days in the desert, constantly badgered by Satan with an increasingly empty stomach. Satan wanted Jesus to think, "Maybe you better take control of the situation. Help yourself just this once, because it doesn't seem like your Father is taking care of you!"

...But the foolish Father of Lies forgot he was dealing with the Holy God himself, **"the Word made flesh."** (John 1:14) Jesus launched his own superior assault from the Word of God. **"It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"** It is not food that preserves people, but the powerful, life-giving Word of God.

Satan refused to give up and launched his second attack. He took Jesus up to the highest point of the temple mount approximately 400+ feet above the Kidron Valley below. If doubt wasn't going to bring down this Jesus, then surely a twisted version of his own Word would! **"If you are the Son of God...throw yourself down. 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.'"** "C'mon, Jesus, prove you're the Son of God! Jump down and see if God saves you. It says he will in his Word!"

Again the foolish serpent forgot he was dealing with the Holy God himself, **"the Word made flesh."** Jesus launched another assault from his holy Word. **"It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"** We are not to throw out common sense, put ourselves into danger, and then expect God to rescue us from our foolishness. Once again the Word defeated Satan.

Satan was reeling, but he wasn't about to give up. Hatred for the holy God and this Jesus burned inside him. He would unleash the big guns this time. He would unleash a temptation that had brought down countless rulers and pretenders for thrones who do not realize the corruptible power of power. Satan took Jesus up to the top of a high mountain and showed him all the power and wealth and prestige that the world can offer. **"All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.'"** "It's that simple. You can set aside all this work and pain and hardship and suffering for power and luxury and comfort and prestige if you simply worship me. Jesus, you don't have to suffer. You don't have to go the cross. Just follow me." Much like he did with Adam and Eve, that was just a bold-faced lie. Satan has nothing to give, nothing to offer, except guilt and misery and death and hell. Only the God of creation, the Lord of heaven and earth, the Lord of grace possesses all things and he alone grants them.

Jesus smashed Satan's attack with a single quote from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. **"Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"** Satan slinked off into the darkness to lick his wounds. Victory belonged to the Lord—until Satan could attack again.

All along Satan didn't realize who he was dealing with. He didn't realize that he was attacking not just a godly human or a human with divine qualities. He was attacking Jesus, who was both fully human and fully God. So try as he might, the devil couldn't possibly do to Jesus what he had done to Adam and Eve. In fact, Jesus proved that he was the Righteous Victor whom God had promised and whom God sent for each and every one of us.

You see, Satan was so blinded by his hatred for God, so blinded by the foolishness of his love for sin, so blinded by his rebellion against God that he completely missed why Jesus was there. Yes, Satan knew that suffering and death would come for Jesus, but it never dawned on the foolish serpent that his greatest "victory" over Jesus would prove to one day be God's ultimate "victory." By his own death, Jesus would crush the serpent's head. By his rising from the dead, Jesus would stand victorious for us.

So fix your eyes on Jesus there in the desert! He came knowing you face and fail to stand up to Satan's daily temptations. He came knowing that you doubt God's Word and will. He came knowing you put your needs, your wants, your priorities before God. He came knowing 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. He came knowing you foolishly test God with little regard for the future or for the consequences. He came knowing you willingly sacrifice everything, even your Christian faith, to satisfy the longings of your sinful heart. He came knowing you fail.

Yet Jesus came to set aside his power and glory to be where you're at, to face what you face, to endure strength-sapping struggles against temptation, and to finally stomp his foot down on the head of that foolish, filthy snake to set you free from Satan's power and sin's betrayal and the terror of death. He came to be holy because you were not. Jesus came to make you holy so by faith you can withstand Satan's temptations and even receive his forgiveness when you fall. He came to stand victoriously with Satan crushed under his heel so you could stand with him in the glories of heaven someday. Satan saw Jesus and now he wallows in the dust of defeat. Dear friends, fix your eyes on Jesus—our Righteous Victor! Amen.