

Matthew 4.1-11
Invocabit (Lent 1)
5 March 2017
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Iesu Iuva +

Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The basis for today's sermon is the Gospel we just heard.

Oremus: sint placentes sermones oris mei, meditationesque cordis nostri, in conspectu tuo, Domine fortitudo mea et redemptor meus. Amen. (Ps. 19.14)

"Beware your adversary the devil, who prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour." So writes St. Peter (1 Pet 5.8). I pray you'll never forget those words. Especially you younger people. The time of the devil's assaults is much greater for you, who have decades and decades to live.

But unpack those words a little bit. The devil's your *adversary*. He's against you. And his every intention is to destroy you—your life, your faith, your eternal life. That's why Jesus calls him a "man-killer" (John 8.44). Not just a murderer. But a man-killer. He is set against the crown of God's creation. And he wreaks his havoc on us day and night.

Of course, though, we love to trivialize. To make the significant insignificant. The devil, a very real creature, a fallen angel, is soon turned into chubby little five-year old kid with an ill-fitting devil costume on for Halloween and a plastic pitchfork, with Reese's peanut butter cups smeared around his mouth. And even if we might find that kind of trivialization a bit coarse and unrefined, it has its effect. The devil becomes a myth. Instead of "the devil" we talk about evil. But what we mean by that is more akin to "things not going the way we'd've liked" than to the real destruction and damage, temporal and eternal, wrought by devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour.

Today's Gospel renders a clear judgment on all such thinking. The devil is real. He encountered and countered Jesus in the wilderness. He appeared to Jesus in person. It wasn't just evil, or evil personified, that presented the thought of turning the stones into bread, or throwing Himself off the temple, or bowing and down and worshipping Satan himself. It was the devil himself. And he presented Jesus with temptations that only the God-Man in all His perfection and holiness could withstand. Who, though He was tempted in every way as we are, yet was without sin.

In short, fellow-redeemed: to trivialize the devil is to trivialize the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's to make a laughingstock of the idea that God should take on human flesh. It's to laugh to scorn that the Son of God should have died for the sins of the world. And to make a myth out of the empty grave on Easter morning. Because the One who did all those things is the One whom the devil attacked in the wilderness. And if there is no devil, none of it happened.

That's the first thing we learn from the Gospel today. The devil is real. More importantly, so is Jesus and what He has done for us.

The second thing we learn is the way he goes to work in tempting us. It's almost like he's using Maslow's hierarchy of needs. First he calls into question our physical security. We need bread to survive. Then he

tests our faith. How far can we push it with God? And last, he lures us with glory and power. What would you do if only...?

That's the order Matthew gives. But it's not necessarily always that way. In different seasons of life the devil tempts us with different things. If you're old and homebound and at the mercy of others? Then he calls into question your physical security and whether God really will take care of you. If you're forty years old and overdue for your midlife crisis, then his lure is the lure of wealth. Power to call the shots at work. What or whom would you worship to have that? And if you're baptized and confirmed—even ordained—he gives you the following test: how far can you go, how far out of bounds, and the Lord will still guard and protect you?

That's the one that's common to us all. For even if just 1% of us are ordained, 80% of us are confirmed. And all of us are baptized children of God. The Lord has already stooped to make us His own. At great cost—the cost of the precious blood and holy, innocent suffering and death of His beloved Son. He has spared nothing. Sending us a preacher. Sending us Christian parents who took us to be baptized as babies and ensured that we went to Catechism. All that God has done for us.

All that God has *already* done for us. So surely! Surely, He's on our side!

That's exactly where the devil had Jesus. Except where you are children of God by adoption through Baptism, Jesus already *was* the Son of God from everlasting to everlasting. If anyone had the favor of God the Father, it was Him.

And the question the devil laid before Him was, in a nutshell, this: "How far can you go, Jesus, before you lose that favor? If God really loves you and cares for you—and He does, because You're His Son—then surely you can throw yourself down from the Temple and He'll send His holy angels to lift You up. So that You won't strike Your foot on the pavement."

Be careful of trivializing this temptation.

It's easy to do, isn't it? Because who of us would, for anyone or anything, throw ourselves off the North Topeka bridge? Or go to the Top of the Tower, stand on the edge, and say, "Lord, I'll see you at the bottom." We all know we'd see Him at the bottom—in judgment.

But this is a real temptation. The devil leads Jesus to the Holy City—to Jerusalem. The city where God Himself dwells in His holy temple. In other words, the devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem where Jesus Himself is the God who dwells there. Where Jesus Himself is the God who watches over Jerusalem. Whose walls are always before His eyes. And he takes Him to the top of the roof. Makes Him stand on the parapet. And then he says, "Jump." It's the temptation to presume on His status. It's a spiritual temptation. And it brings with it death and eternal death. Because that's what the devil's always after. He's a "man-killer." Both in this life and the next.

And this is a temptation that's not far from any of us. How easy it is to become presumptuous! How easy it is to say, "I already belong to the holy city, God's church on earth. I'm guarded and protected. And no matter what I do—the Lord has my back."

The devil gets us there just like he got Jesus there. He cites the word of God. And, as in Jesus' case, he cites it in part.

This is what the devil says to Jesus. He says, "He'll command His angels concerning you." What Jesus is supposed to think and believe is that He can throw Himself from the pinnacle, and—SNAP!—the Lord will send a legion of angels to bear Him up.

But just look how masterful the devil is. He cuts it off right where he needs to. Because the full passage reads like this: "He will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways." That is, God's command and protection of the angels stretches no further than the way God has commanded us to walk. And that pertains to the following promise: "On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone."

And now we're getting somewhere with this. Because this is exactly how we live! The devil opens a door for presumption on the Lord's grace and goodness. But unlike Jesus, when we see it open, we rush right through it. Isn't this how it goes with you?

"God forgives. So I can do whatever I want, whether it's according to His Law or against it. He'll understand!" But then what of repentance? What of turning from sin and hating it?

"I'm baptized. Which means I'm saved. So I don't need to attend church." But then what of faith? And then what of how faith is fed—through God's Word? And a close neighbor of that one?

"I know I don't get my kids to church very often. Or I just don't want to. Sunday morning's too precious to me. But at least they're baptized."

Make no mistake, fellow-redeemed: that's the same exact presumption to which the devil tempted Jesus. To rely on God in a way that He can't be relied on. Because He can be relied on only as He has revealed.

You know, the devil doesn't just go for the easy little sins. He goes for the big ones. Those sins I just mentioned don't very look big to us. But they are. Grave sins. A sin against the 1st Commandment that you should fear, love, and trust in God above all things. A sin against the 2nd Commandment. A misuse of the Lord's name to teach what He doesn't. By warping His Word, he pits God against Himself, and His Christians against God.

Fellow-redeemed: If that's you, you should be stricken with terrors at the way you've chosen to walk. You've failed to take stock of your adversary the devil. And he's devouring you. And it can only lead to eternal death. I beg you by the mercies of Jesus: repent. That means: don't do it again.

But be assured by what I'm about to tell you next. The third thing we should learn from the Gospel today. Jesus didn't come to trivialize your sins. He came to conquer them. Jesus didn't come into the flesh to be tempted in every way as you but without sin for Himself, but for you. He's like David of old. David's defeat of Goliath wasn't for himself. It was for all Israel. Just so, Jesus' defeat of all temptation and sin and death isn't just for Himself, but for all believers in Christ, the New Israel. Once David had slain Goliath, all Israel was free from his threat.

The same exact thing is true for you. Now that Christ has withstood the devil who prowls about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, you, the New Israel are free from his threat. Your sins can no longer devour you.

You know, after David killed Goliath all Israel rallied around him. He had saved them. To be close to David was to be close to the one into whose hands the Lord had given every victory. If you were with David, you were safe.

That's what the New Israel does, too. We can't say, "Well. David killed Goliath, so I'll go off and live among the Philistines." No!

Instead, we say, "David killed Goliath, and so I want to be with David. That is, Christ has overcome all sin and death for me. And so I want to be with Christ. Because apart from Christ, all I have is sin and death. And those are hardly trivial. Because to win the victory the very Son of God had to go toe-to-toe with the devil for me. To win the victory for me it cost the Son of God His life."

And that's why, fellow-redeemed, we gather here in His Church, in His New Israel, regularly. Because here the Lord Jesus opens up the floodgates of that life and victory to you. I know it doesn't like much. A little bit of water, bread, and wine. And words. But that's what Jesus has chosen to use in order to make His life victory yours. He pours it over your head, lays it on your tongue and lips, shouts it into your ears through the preaching of His Word. ...

All things that the world may trivialize—along with the devil. Along with Jesus Himself.

But then again, they don't see what you do. They don't see that there in the wilderness Jesus took to himself all that belongs to you—your sins, your death, your hell, your temptation. And so they can't possibly understand what a little bit of water and a little bit of wine and bread taken in His name can do: make everything that belongs to Jesus yours. His victory over sin, death, hell, and temptation. Right here. For you. Hardly a trivial thing at all.

May the good Lord you keep you in that faith to life everlasting. Amen.

pax dei, etc.

*jsb
sdg*