

March 5, 2017
First Sunday in Lent

“Repenting into the Winner”

Matthew 4:1-11

Many Christians and many preachers have looked at this Gospel reading about the temptation of Christ as a model for resisting temptation. The basic take away is that if you face temptation, run to God’s Word. Well yeah—in a perfect world, but this isn’t a perfect world.

The thief who sees a wallet in an unattended purse isn’t thinking about “Thou shalt not steal” or “love your neighbor as yourself.” He’s thinking about himself and some quick cash. The computer user stumbling down the rabbit hole of pornography isn’t thinking “blessed are the pure in heart,” he’s thinking about lust. Yes, studying, pondering and running to Holy Scripture in the face of temptation is a good practice when it works...but it’s not always going to work.

And this is really one of the points being made by the Holy Spirit in leading Jesus into the wilderness to fast and be tempted. Jesus is standing in for the nation of Israel who totally failed in this temptation. Israel got hungry and whined against God. Israel constantly tested God, demanding God perform in ways they wanted. (We’re sick of this manna; give us meat to eat.) And Israel never seemed to see a false god they didn’t jump at worshiping instead of Yahweh. Israel had the Word of God written on tablets by the finger of God, spoken to them through the prophets of God and attested to by the wonders of God. But in temptation they failed, failed, failed, failed and failed some more.

No, what we have going on here in the desert is much more than an example. What we have is God in human skin doing battle and winning!

The Holy Spirit leads Jesus out to the wilderness and directs Jesus to fast for forty days. And surprise, surprise, He’s hungry. But that’s no small detail. Jesus is enduring human suffering and want, the same or worse than Israel or you or I do.

Then Satan shows up and starts lobbing temptations; the same temptations that worked time and time again on Israel. The same temptations we fall before in various ways, shapes and forms in our daily lives. But where Satan’s curveballs get past us time and time again, often without our even taking a swing against them, Jesus knocks them all out of the park. This is Jesus in our humanity being victorious for us in our humanity.

And, of course, Jesus doesn’t stop winning. He lives human life right, rightly, righteously. And even as our human curse for sin is draped on His shoulders and He dies human death in our stead, He keeps winning. The temptation is shouted, “*You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.*” Jesus, still, is steadfast in the will of the Father. He hangs there. He suffers. He dies. He is victorious over our temptation, our love of self, our sin. For us.

And then in His resurrection He is victorious over our death. For us. Jesus wins.

It is very important to understand this, especially during Lent when we put such a large focus on contrition and sorrow over our sins.

Let me ask you something, if all you had to ponder about your salvation was the behavior of individual Jews and the nation of Israel as a whole in the Old Testament, how sure would you be about being saved? I mean, is there anybody or any event that you can look at and say, “There is a victory enduring unto eternity”?

No. The nation, even in the best of times, was always backsliding and tripping up in sin and temptation. The northern tribes end up getting hauled into oblivion by Assyria. And the tribe of Judah that's left is exiled in Babylon and then returns to for the most part always be a vassal to some other empire. Israel fails.

Individuals? Nope. Moses takes glory for himself. Elijah doubts. Even the "man after God's own heart," King David, brings a curse on his own family through adultery and murder and even on his deathbed is ordering the evening or old grudges. They all fail.

When you come before God with your sins in repentance, does your prayer contain anything like, "I'm sorry. I'll try harder," or "I'll do better tomorrow, I promise"? Are there thoughts in the back of your mind asking, "Can He really still forgive me after I went ahead and did this for the hundredth time?" Do you doubt your sins can be pardoned because deep inside there is a part of you that just plain tolerates, entertains and even enjoys them?

That's you looking at you for victory. It is every bit as unfruitful as Israel looking to Israel for victory or King David looking to King David for righteousness. There is none to be had there! No! In our sin and repentance look at Jesus!

"Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous."

Jesus is victorious God in your skin! There is no doubt in Him because He does it all right, rightly, righteously in you. That's God's gift to you in Holy Baptism. That's God's gift to you in the Lord's Supper. God's promise fulfilled is the Holy Christ in you and you in the Holy Christ—You declared "not guilty" as Jesus is not guilty. No question; Jesus wins!

Yes, there will be fruit of repentance in your life to one degree or another for sure. Being declared holy by God will have its effect. We struggle against sin, strategize ways to resist the crafty temptations of Satan and seek to cling more closely to our Savior and His Word of salvation. But we know from the start that we will fail yet nevertheless we stand victorious in Jesus Christ; the God in our skin who thwarted every single attack of Satan and stands today our King in glory forever.

So really, do not look at this temptation of Jesus as an example for you to follow. Doing that will just bust your hope because you will never consistently pass your tests as Jesus does. He's God! He's perfect! And doing that is making His temptation so much less than what it is.

This is Jesus in human skin doing battle with the enemy for humanity in humanity's place! This is the beginning of the fight that Jesus wins and wins and wins again all the way to the cross and through the empty tomb! This is the Savior in your skin doing the salvation He gives you, puts in you again and again through His Word and Sacraments. This is His victory and in your skin it's your victory also.

In your repentance don't be bringing your performance to Jesus, as if it's something He's going to inspect and possibly reject for its flaws. Trust me. Jesus already knows you're a loser. He's had an entire history of experience with humanity.

No, in your repentance know that you come before THE winner, the one who has already defeated your falls into temptation, paid for them, and beat them to death in His cross and grave. Come to Jesus knowing that He is victory in your skin and in Him, by His declaration of forgiveness, you have victory over it all forever.

Amen.