

February 2, 2025

The Purification of Mary and the Presentation of Our Lord

“Helped and Redefined”

Hebrews 2:14-18

I was going to preach on the epistle lesson today because the Gospel reading was preached on in December when it came up the First Sunday After Christmas. But the thrust of the Hebrews reading is in large part about how Jesus is our brother in the flesh—something I preached on just a couple weeks ago. So my mind ended up focusing on that last verse there, *“For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”*

This ended up being more problematic than I expected and perhaps you can empathize with why. Have you ever faced a temptation to sin and recognized it for the temptation toward evil sin that it is, prayed to Jesus for strength against it, and then in the end you fall to the sin anyway? I have. So was the help of Jesus not forthcoming? You couple this with what St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians and it seems things should go the other way: *“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”*

Jesus suffered when tempted. There is no doubt about that. He had fasted 40 days and was hungry when the devil tempted Him in the wilderness. He was sorely tempted to come down from the agony of the cross during His passion. He certainly suffered a lot of indignities from the Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers and I’ve got to believe there was a temptation to withhold His love from these underserving sinners and smite them with the just wrath of God. In His suffering He withstands the temptation. But He is Jesus; the Son of God. How does that help me when I’m tempted?

Well, what we really want in those times is Jesus simply to reach out with His divine power and “ZAP”, make the whole predicament disappear—change us so that temptation just isn’t a thing with us anymore. But that would negate the need for the faith by which we receive God’s grace in Christ. So what’s the deal?

I don’t have any easy answer for you. Holy Scripture is clear, falling to temptation is our fault—no exceptions. St. Paul isn’t lying—there is always another option than doing the sin. It may cost us, it may hurt, in the extreme it might even mean we die, but there’s always a way out. Yet we fail, sometimes even in the midst of pleading to Jesus for deliverance. So how is it that Jesus helps?

One big way He helps us, if we can bring ourselves to realize it, is that He redefines us.

I’m an ex-smoker. I smoked cigarettes for 19 years—2 packs a day of what they called Cowboy Killers—Marlborough reds—and not the lights; I went full strength. I had tried to stop smoking on any number of occasions, but I always failed. And looking back on it I think one big reason I failed was that I always considered myself a smoker who was trying to quit.

I finally succeeded when my outlook changed. I made the decision that I was no longer a smoker who was trying to quit—I was indeed an ex-smoker. Admittedly, some drugs my doctor prescribed to lessen the withdrawal symptoms helped, but I went to the doctor for the drugs because I wasn’t going to try to quit; I was going to be an ex-smoker. For me, that really was a game changer.

Likewise, and especially as Lutherans, we get one truth stuck in our heads and it is that we are indeed poor, miserable sinners. So then when we are tempted we think of ourselves as poor, miserable sinners trying to not sin. Sinner trying not to sin doesn't sound like a recipe for success, does it? No. It's not. Seeing things that way, we set ourselves up for failure...even if we pray to Jesus for help! Why? Because we are looking at us and how we are defined by God's holy law—we're failures. We are failures asking Jesus to give us failures the strength for us failures to overcome the temptation. But we're still failures.

*"For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."* The onus is on Jesus the victor there; not on me the failure; the sinner. And it's not Jesus saying, "I did it, so you should be able to do it too." That would just be more of that law we find impossible to keep.

What rightly seeing Jesus tells us is that He suffered temptation and prevailed...as do you in Him. The whole failure part is removed from the equation. The Gospel is that Jesus redefines you from sinner to holy child of God—adopted as a child of God just as He truly is the Son of God!

This is our new reality in Holy Baptism of which St. Paul writes, *"We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."* Jesus has taken that poor, miserable sinner and made you a new creation, a holy being, one with the Christ who suffered temptation but never gave in.

So work on this truth to make it your mindset when temptation comes a calling. Your reality is not a poor, miserable sinner trying not to sin. You are a holy child of God and sin now has no part with you. You stand victorious over sin. You have been redefined by Christ as in Christ and one with Christ. We don't face temptation as if apart from Jesus saying "But He is Jesus; the Son of God." We stand in Christ and He in us! Can there be a stronger position in which to stand?

Does this mean you now will stand fast against every and all temptations to sin? Well, even St. Paul in Romans lamented about the sin still clinging to his flesh. But at the same time he expounded about how that sin was indeed a foreign entity. It was not master over him. In Christ his reality was not "poor, miserable sinner." In Christ, sin is no longer your reality either.

So can we do better in facing temptations to sin? Yes. We can. *"For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."* That is not an unclear pronouncement from God's Word there.

Always seeking to cling more closely to Christ and dwell in Him, our reality is victors over sin, not victims of it. Get the Gospel truth solid in your heart and take it to the fight. And when you fail to hold the field, know that Christ suffered this same battle and won the day in your stead. Victory forever is yours.

Amen.