

March 9, 2025
First Sunday in Lent

“Leading, Misleading”

Luke 4:1-13

We’ve all been there. Maybe it was in a crisis of some sort. We prayed for God to send His Spirit upon us or someone we love...for healing perhaps, of maybe comfort in grief, or to bring us through some difficult circumstances. Or perhaps it was just a crossroads where we were unsure which way to go, which career opportunity to follow, what person to trust, how to navigate out of some occurrence that was over our head. We pray the Holy Spirit would give us clarity and guidance to lead us in the right direction and bring us comfort and peace. We ask such things of God.

Our Gospel text today tells us Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit after His baptism and was being led by the Spirit. Where did that Spirit bring Him? It was not a place of comfort and peace. It was the wilderness; a place of scarcity and want where the devil waited to tempt Him toward sin. Jesus was taken by the Spirit to a place where He was challenged to choose between the leading of the Holy Spirit or the misleading of the deceiving and damned devil.

I think this is significant. As we begin this penitential season of Lent we are encouraged to examine ourselves in penitent faith. In doing so we typically measure ourselves against the good and holy law of God. This is good because we surely fall short of that mark and thus are driven by sorrow to the feet of Christ to beg for His mercy as we should and receive His blessed forgiveness.

However, in light of Christ’s temptation and really, His entire earthly life which led to suffering and a cross, perhaps we should go further and ponder whose lead we are following. When you look at Christ’s temptations in the wilderness only one of the three is a direct attempt to get Jesus to violate the law. The others are more about getting Jesus to deviate from the Spirit’s leading, one to ignore the summoning to fast and two to test rather than trust in God.

We, as followers of Christ, should seek to go beyond merely avoiding running afoul of the law and look deeper, to where we may be allowing ourselves to be misled from where God would have us go.

We desire peace and comfort and we even pray for such things; nothing wrong with that. But we should be very wary of making the bold assumption that whatever serves to bring us peace and comfort in the way we desire it must be God’s will. I mean, stop and think about some of the things we’ve been talking about in church lately. Loving enemies, blessing the ones cursing us, surrendering what is ours to those who take it from us, turning the other cheek—absolutely none of these would seem to serve our peace and comfort, but this is what Jesus exhorts.

If Jesus had been following the protocol of “whatever brings me joy must be God’s will,” He wouldn’t have made it past the first temptation. He was hungry. That stone would have been made bread, maybe even a roast beef po-boy! (Kosher, of course.) But the Holy Spirit’s leading was not toward comfort, but toward fasting.

This episode of Christ’s temptation prompts us to not only ask “Where is the Holy Spirit leading me,” which is a very good question to ponder. But it also suggests that we should keep an eye out in examination of our lives to answer the question, “Where is the devil seeking to mislead me?”

An easy example would be allowing the materialism of our culture to hold sway over us. It is pretty easy to think, “God has blessed me with my wealth and I give my fair bit of it back to His church, so God must want me to have more toys, better clothes, bigger house, fancier vacations, etcetera...” Mind you, I’m not saying such things are necessarily bad. But do we even stop to ask if that’s what the

Holy Spirit is leading us to do with the wealth, or do we just go with, “That’s what makes me happy and it’s not against God’s law so I’m running with it”?

Consider our attitude toward sharing the Gospel. If we believe God’s will is our peace and comfort, are we ever going to leave our comfort zone and risk reaching out to someone with the message of Christ crucified? No. Yet, what? Are we to suppose that the Spirit is never leading us to share the good news?

I can’t say I have a really clear message about this. I’m drawing this from the action of Satan in our Gospel reading. He was trying to mislead Jesus with clever argument and rationalization. I have no doubt he attempts the same with each one of us. But we have the liability of a fallen, sinful nature that is very eager to follow the self-centered path he puts before us.

Perhaps a good Lenten discipline to put into practice is to not just focus on your most grievous sin, but also to look at the rest of your life; the parts that don’t seem sinful. Look at your goals, priorities, the stuff that seems to make you happy, the things that make you comfortable and perhaps the things that challenge that comfort. Pray about these and soberly ask yourself and the Holy Spirit, “Are any of these the misleading of Satan”? Such things may not be outright sins against God’s Holy Law, but they might be distractions designed to detour you from following the leading of the Holy Spirit.

This is a challenge because we do like peace and comfort. Who would want to give that up? But as believers in Jesus Christ, we more so desire to follow where He leads. And He is the Savior who said things like, “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” “In the world you will have tribulation but take heart, I have overcome the world” and of course the whole taking up a cross thing.

This is why we must keep focused on Jesus and where He leads by the power of the Holy Spirit. His life was not one of comfort. As the prophet Isaiah puts it, “*He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*”

His life, directed by the leading of the Holy Spirit, led to suffering and a cross. And yet, His life was not lost, but resurrected in glory!

He did this so that, by grace alone, we might have that same life forever. This is where the Holy Spirit leads us. This is that from which the devil is trying to mislead us. Peace and comfort in and with the world is that by which Satan works—that is crystal clear in this temptation of Christ.

So the exhortation this morning is for you to seriously examine your life not just for blatant sin, but also for the following of paths, nice peaceful and comfortable paths in life, that may be misleadings away from where the Holy Spirit wishes you to follow. Do this prayerfully, asking for that same Spirit’s guidance. It’s what Christians do.

If you find yourself following such detours, don’t panic. This is the wonderful thing about Jesus. He followed perfectly so when you repent to Him, that Holy Baptism He did to you puts You right there in Him on the road to paradise.

So beware. Don’t get hoodwinked by the peace and comfort of the world. The tricky devil is always trying to make you think it’s all about life here and now and you and this world.

You know better. Christ has showed you the way. It’s all about Him forgiving your sins and leading you through this world, possibly through suffering, tribulation and self-sacrifice, but always to the perfect and better life you will live forever in His glory.

Amen.