

“A Blessing in Disguise”

Matthew 4:1-11, First Sunday in Lent- A

March 5, 2017

Many of you know that on October 31st of this year, many Christians throughout the world will celebrate the 500th ANNIVERSARY OF THE REFORMATION. For it was on **October 31, 1517** that Dr. Martin Luther nailed his “Ninety-Five Theses” to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg (Germany today)!

Of course, many of us have come to expect that we will always sing: “*A Mighty Fortress Is Our God!*” on **Reformation Sunday**. But have you ever noticed that for at least some **20 to 25 years now**, we also in **this place have joined millions of other Christians** around the **globe** in singing: “*A Mighty Fortress Is Our God!*” on this **First Sunday in Lent** too?

It is appropriate that we do so—on this Sunday when we **give our most humble and hearty thanks and praise** to our **Heavenly Father**—that **Jesus successfully resisted every temptation** that had been **brought before him by Satan**, out there in the **wilderness—by his faithfully wielding the “Sword of the Spirit”** which is **the Word of God (Ephesians 4:17)!** It is appropriate that we give our most humble and hearty thanks to our Heavenly Father on this day—because **Jesus as the “Second Adam” did for us** what the **“first Adam” failed to do!** And Jesus **didn’t** do this **primarily for his benefit but for ours!**

(1) Yes, Jesus provides us with a powerful example to follow—but:

(2) Far more importantly—he did for us that which we never could have done for ourselves—**fulfilling the law of God perfectly for us on our behalf!**

According to tradition, Martin Luther wrote this great hymn ten years after he had nailed those Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg! He wrote it sometime after April 22, 1527—because on that particular Sunday—as Martin Luther was preaching the Gospel—he felt forced to **stop preaching right in the middle sermon**—because of a great “dizzy spell” that had overcome him that day.

A few weeks later, when Luther regained his strength and stamina—he wanted the whole world to know—what he wholeheartedly believed—that **any strength; any real strength** that had ever come to him throughout his life—with which **he faced the biggest problems and confronted the greatest challenges** that ever came to him in life—was a **strength that came to him 100% by the grace of God.**

As we read about the temptation experiences of Christ in our Gospel lesson this morning (Matthew 4:1-11), we are told that Jesus was hungry! Yes, he was God incarnate—God who had taken upon himself our human flesh and blood, but he was also true Man—that is—really human! Sometimes when people miss a meal or two, we might hear them say—that they feel that they are going to die! So how can we even begin to imagine how Jesus must have felt, out there in the wilderness, after spending forty days and forty nights without food?

Temptation One – Command Stones to Become Bread

But you see—it is precisely at this moment, when according to Jesus’ human nature—that **he was at his weakest moment**—that Satan comes to him to tempt him saying: **“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread” (v. 3)!**

Was Jesus actually capable of commanding some inanimate objects, like stones, to become loaves of bread? Was this actually within the realm of Jesus’ own miraculous power? Most certainly Jesus was capable of doing this—when we stop and remember how actually, on several occasions, he later fed thousands of people with a very limited food supply; several loaves of bread and two fish.

Why did Jesus’ resist this temptation? He certainly **did not want to give us the idea that so many people** live with today—that **so long as our physical needs are being met**—that we therefore have absolutely 100% of everything we will ever need to know the joy of our living out a full and **“abundant life”** in this world (John 10:10)!

Therefore Jesus quoted **Deuteronomy 8:3: “Behold, it is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (v. 4)!** The verse Jesus references here is God’s command through Moses to the children of Israel—to stop doing something which they had continually done! To stop lodging their horrendous complaints against Moses and the LORD God for having brought them out of Egypt; from which Moses and the LORD God also led them out of slavery into freedom!

Even though the people of Israel tested and doubted God’s care and provision, Jesus as the **“New Israel”** would not! Jesus would not doubt or become presumptuous with respect to his Heavenly Father!

Temptation Two – Throw Yourself Down from the Pinnacle of the Temple

Secondly, Satan took Jesus to the pinnacle (top) of the temple and challenged him—to see if he really did trust in God the Heavenly Father to preserve his life in the face of danger as the Second Adam. Satan tells Jesus: *“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone’’ (v. 11)!*

The second temptation was actually quite simple: *“Throw yourself down and let God your Heavenly Father catch you right before splatter your guts all over the ground! And to up the “ante” Satan even quotes a passage from the Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures to fortify the foolish challenge he is now setting before the Son of God!*

Yes, Satan knows the Bible far better than most of us will ever come to know it—but one of his primary strategies in his constant attempt to wreck our human lives—is to twist the words of Scripture, to misquote the Bible, therefore making it say something that the Bible never intended to say at all!

Therefore, Satan now quotes Psalm 91:11: *“He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘on their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone!”* But wouldn’t you know it! Just like he always does—he misconstrued this Bible passage by omitting the second half of verse 11, where the psalmist writes: *“For he will command his angels concerning you—TO GUARD YOU IN ALL YOUR WAYS!”*

“To guard you in all your ways”—is not to do something as foolishly as to throw yourself physically down to the ground from a lofty place, expecting God almighty to catch you; especially **without a parachute to slow you down!**

Once again, Jesus responds to the devil’s temptation by taking up the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. Jesus answers Satan directly by quoting **Deuteronomy 6:16** to him: *“It is written again, ‘You shall not put the LORD your God to the test’” (v. 7)!*

I can’t help but wonder if there are not still some times today when certain people may fall prey to this same kind of temptation—when they find their lives they say so dull and boring that they choose to participate in something that in more recent years

has been classified as **“EXTREME SPORTS”** so that they might experience that great **adrenaline rush** that comes to them, they say, by **living out their lives “on the edge!”**? You know those **so-called sports and activities** that often involve **speed, height, a high level of physical exertion and highly specialized gear!** Perhaps some extreme forms of offshore powerboat racing, wakeboarding, water skiing, air gliding, motorcycle racing, rallying, Motocross and the like!

Temptation Three – Fall Down and Worship Me

In his third temptation, we are told that Satan brings our Lord Jesus to an exceedingly high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. He then says to our Savior: *“All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me”* (v. 9)!

Brothers and sisters, Satan’s pride here is beyond arrogance! Just think of it, the creature Satan, though powerful and once highly exalted, suggests that he is **worthy to be worshiped by Christ and that he would generously give back—what was not his to give away—in the first place, to its rightful owner!**

In this temptation, Satan was also tempting Jesus to veer away completely from the cross! And doesn’t this help us to **better understand those seemingly harsh words of Jesus to Peter**, when immediately after Jesus had told his disciples that it was the Father’s will for him, as the Son of Man, to go up to Jerusalem, to suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, that he would be crucified there and raised to new life again on the third day—that **Peter’s immediate response** to Jesus was: *“God forbid, Lord, this shall never happen to you”* (Matthew 16:22)!

You remember how Jesus responded! He looked at Peter and said, *“Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man”* (Matthew 16:21-23).

It is not necessarily that Jesus was calling Peter “Satan” but that Satan was now using Peter’s voice as his own mouthpiece!

Brothers and sisters, have you ever had one of those times when something in your life happened to you that seemed to be so terrible at the time, but later came to believe that our merciful God brought some blessing to you out of that bad experience (Romans 8:28)?

Maybe therefore you later said to yourself: "It turned out to be a blessing in disguise!" Similarly, we call "Good" Friday, not because we are insensitive to our Savior's great suffering and passion, but because it turned out to be so good for us and also because the word "good" is actually derived from the word "God" who is always the Source of all good things in this life!

This time of Jesus' temptations turned to be a **blessing in disguise**, perhaps for him also, because he emerged from that experience with a deep sense of victory that he had won the battle against Satan on the devil's own playing field. But it also is a great **blessing in disguise for us too**. Without that experience, the writer of Hebrew could never have written those lovely, comforting and powerful words to us: "*For **we do not have a high priest** who is **unable to sympathize** with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin*" (Hebrews 4:15)!

So please let me close my sermon this morning by bringing to your attention an old spiritual song, a "Mountain Spiritual" it's sometimes called, because it was originally sung among those people who enjoy life in the Appalachian Mountains and enjoy that great of "Blue Grass" music. The song I have in mind today is entitled: "Jesus walked this Lonesome Valley!" For certainly the first part of this song is true enough! It goes something like this:

Jesus walked this lonesome valley! He had to walk it by himself!
Oh, nobody else could walk it for him; he had to walk it by himself!

This verse actually does a pretty good job of describing the spiritual truth we have just heard in our Gospel lesson today – the story of Jesus, alone in the wilderness, enduring those temptations of the devil! But there is another similar segment to this song in that old mountain spiritual that goes like this—and with it I have to express my profound disagreement. That verse goes like this:

You've got to walk this lonesome valley! You've got to walk it by yourself!
Oh, nobody else can walk it for you! You've got to walk it by yourself!

The good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ tells us that this is no longer true for us at all—in our relationship with the Triune God—because of what the Holy Son of God has endured for all of us! Because of Jesus we never again have to go through the trials and the troubles of this life by ourselves and walk through those lonesome valleys by ourselves!

Listen to these words from **Psalm 139**, where the psalmist prays the following words to our God:

*Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!*

*If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
Even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.
If I say, "Surely the darkness will cover me, and the light about me be night!"
Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day,
For darkness is as light with you! AMEN*