

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church, Modesto, California  
**The First Sunday in Lent**  
February 29, 2004

Sermon by Pastor Jonathon Micheel

Luke 4:1-13

<sup>1</sup> *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert,* <sup>2</sup> *where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.*

<sup>3</sup> *The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."*

<sup>4</sup> *Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone.'"*

<sup>5</sup> *The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.* <sup>6</sup> *And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to."* <sup>7</sup> *So if you worship me, it will all be yours."*

<sup>8</sup> *Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"*

<sup>9</sup> *The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here."* <sup>10</sup> *For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; <sup>11</sup> they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."*

<sup>12</sup> *Jesus answered, "It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*

<sup>13</sup> *When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.*

(NIV)

How would you feel if your life story were prewritten and you got to read it? What I have in mind is this: what if you knew all the major events that were going to occur within your lifetime—even if you didn't know the exact dates and times? Would you like that?

I suppose the good things that were going to happen in your life—these you'd be happy to know about. Like "Someday you will win the Nobel Prize." Great! Or "You will marry the man of your dreams." But what if there were bad things in your life story and you knew about them in advance? "Someday all your friends will turn their backs on you... Someday you will experience excruciating pain... Someday you will be punished for a crime you did not commit." How would you feel about that?

The life story of Jesus was written, even before his birth in Bethlehem. The main events in the life of our Lord were already mapped out, and many were even spelled out in the pages of the Old Testament Scriptures. Our life stories as children of God are also planned out. And they bear an uncanny resemblance to the life story of the Son of God. Today, let's look at the life story of the Son of God, which forms the pattern for the life of every child of God. Based on the part of the Bible before us today, we will sum up these life stories in this way:

### **Fierce Battle, Ultimate Victory**

#### **It's the life story of the Son of God**

The life story of Jesus had been written. We get glimpses of it as we read the Old Testament. What was Jesus, the Anointed One, the Christ, to be? He was to be a perfect servant of God. He was to be faithful, unfailingly loyal to God. He was to love God the Father with all his heart, soul, mind and strength. He was to love the people around him flawlessly. He

was to shine the grace of God into the world—to be a light for the nations. We could summarize what Jesus was to do and to be in the words of Luther’s Small Catechism. Luther summarizes the meaning of the First Commandment, and this summary tells us what the Christ was to do: he was to fear, love and trust in God above all things.

And so we find Jesus, out in the desert, having just embarked upon the last phase of his mission. He had just been baptized in the River Jordan. There he stood shoulder to shoulder with sinners. There God the Father had said, “This is my Son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased.” In other words, Jesus had been doing what he had come to do: fear, love and trust in God flawlessly.

But now the devil comes. And do you see what Satan is trying to do? He is trying to get Jesus to take the life story written for him and reject it, to replace it with a different, more appealing life story. Look at the temptations...

(Satan:) *Did God really say that you are his son? Well, if you are in fact a son of God, then tell me this: Why are you starving out here in a desert? If you are a son of God, you sure don’t look it. If God loves you, he sure has a funny way of showing it. Come on. Seize a better life. Forget this life of discipline and sacrifice. Forget this self-denial. Do what you want! If you’re hungry, eat! If you want something, take it! If this is what your Father wants you to do, then don’t listen to him. Do what you want. Tell this stone to become bread.*

(Jesus:) ***It is written*** (See? Jesus is going back to the life story that his Father had laid out for him, the one written in the Scriptures!), ***Man does not live on bread alone. Life is about more than satisfying your hunger. Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. My father has proclaimed me to be his beloved Son. Therefore, I will not doubt that I am. My Father has determined my course; I will respect his word above yours or anyone else’s and fear him above all things.***

(Satan:) *Your Father? Why do you love him, anyway? What has he done for you lately? Given you a home in the household of a carpenter for the last thirty years? Now left you alone and hungry in the desert? Come, see what I can give you. Satan shows Jesus the kingdoms of the world in an instant, with all their authority and splendor. I will give you these, right now. And if there was ever anyone who deserves all these things, it is you. Just worship me. Love me. And love yourself; you’ll be so much happier if you worship me and take what I’m offering.*

(Jesus:) ***It is written*** (He’s going back again to the life story his Father has written), ***“Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.” I will not serve you. Nor will I serve myself and gratify any desires I might have to bring myself glory and wealth and ease in an instant. I will walk the hard path my Father has laid out for me. He will give me strength. He will vindicate me and give me victory. After I have been brought low in death he will raise me up. And he will always love me.***

Satan takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem. (Satan:) *If you really are a son of God—and that’s a big if—then take advantage of your Father’s power. Throw yourself down from here. He will command his angels to take care of you—that’s what is written, right? But you can’t be sure it’s true until you try it. Or maybe you doubt. Maybe you don’t want to throw yourself down, even though it is written that he will care for you. You can’t just take your Father at his word, can you?*

(Jesus:) ***Yes, I can. It is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” I don’t need to see proof that my Father’s promises are true before I believe them. My Father, unlike you, does not lie. My Father, unlike you, backs up his words with action. I trust him.***

Fear, love and trust in God above all things. To do that Jesus had to say no to plans that went against the life of deprivation and sacrifice his Father had planned. Jesus had to say no to worshipping his own desires or the desires of anyone else. He had to trust his Father, taking

him at his word even when everything around him told him to forget it. And our Lord did it all perfectly—fearing, loving and trusting God above all things—even trusting his Father in the darkest days, when the path laid out for him led to a whip and a cross and a tomb. “Someday all your friends will turn their backs on you... Someday you will experience excruciating pain... Someday you will be punished for a crime you did not commit... Someday you will die.”

To the untrained eye, this seems like failure. *Jesus came into the world to live a humble life, then to suffer and die?* It seems like defeat. But with Jesus, there’s always more than meets the eye. The humble life Jesus lived, respecting and loving and trusting his Father—that’s the life all of us should have lived. But all of humankind, from Adam on down, failed. Jesus came to succeed where we failed. And he did succeed. He came to be our substitute, to live a perfect life, a life that God now credits to you and me. And the death that he died? It was not a defeat for him. It was a victory, because by suffering for the sins of the world by himself, he spared all of us from ever having to suffer for our sins. He defeated our sin. And let’s not forget that Jesus did not stay dead. He defeated death itself. Death has no mastery over him. Nor does hell. Nor does the devil who tempted him to leave behind the life story the Father gave him.

So the pattern of Jesus’ life, his life story is this: fierce battle, ultimate victory. Battling to live as we ought all to have lived, fearing and loving and trusting God without fail, then battling hell and the devil in death. But then, with a perfect life, an all-atoning death and a triumphant resurrection, claiming victory. Fierce battle, ultimate victory.

### **It’s the life story of every child of God**

This is also the pattern for every child of God: fierce battle, ultimate victory. Jesus said, If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. (Luke 9:23) We will have sinful desires; we all have to live with a sinful nature on this side of heaven. Jesus tells us that we will constantly be battling those sinful desires. The sin-infected world around us won’t be much help to us. We will have to battle evil influences all around us. And the devil—he’s real, and he’s not the cartoon character with red pajamas and a cute pitchfork. He’s a real, powerful spirit who wants us to burn in hell, who will lie and deceive and do whatever it takes to get us there.

The devil’s tactic in tempting us is the same as it was when he tempted our Lord. The devil tried to get Jesus to replace his God-ordained life story with another one. The devil does the same for us. He says, “Forget about this life of self-denial and cross-carrying. Trade it in for another life that I can give you, a life of pleasure, indulgence, of happiness right here and now.” It will be a battle to stay true to the life to which Jesus has called us. The life he calls us to live is often a hard one. It’s a life of saying No to things that we want when those things go against what God wants. It’s a constant battle with the devil—just like the battle Jesus fought.

But let me tell you something that changes everything: the victory is already won! Here’s what I mean. We do battle with temptation every day. But we don’t battle temptation thinking, “If I do well enough, I’ll go to heaven. If not, I’ll go to hell.” No. The victory over sin and hell has already been won, not by us but by Jesus. The devil is a loser, not because we defeated him but because Jesus defeated him. We stand in the presence of God every day and God thinks of us as his holy kids, not because we’ve made ourselves holy, but because Jesus lived a flawless life and now gives us the credit for it. We stand in the presence of God as holy people not because we’ve been so good that we’ve made up for all the bad we’ve done, but because Jesus has died in our place and paid for all the bad we’ve done. Jesus has already won the victory, and he shares it with us.

Having the victory won already—that changes everything! We are tempted to sin everyday, to not fear and love and trust in God above all, but to put our own desires above God’s, to pay

attention to ourselves while we ignore him. But we battle these temptations. Why? Because if we can keep from sinning God will be so impressed that he'll take us to heaven? No. Because God has already promised to take us to heaven. We fight to do God's will because he loved us and served us and saved us. And how do we battle sin? Not by ourselves, but knowing that the one who fought for us is still with us, coming in Word and Supper to give us strength to fight.

When Satan tempts us to just do what we want, to satisfy the appetites of our flesh, whatever they may be, we fight. When he tells us to trade in our life story for a different one, we see through his lies. When Satan tempts us to love other people or things, we fight. When Satan tempts us to doubt God and place our trust in other things, we fight. Why do we fight? We fight because Jesus loved us enough to deny himself and take up his cross for us, following his Father's word. We battle our selfish desires knowing that real life is found not in just getting what we want, but in the words and promises of our God. We fight because God's commitment to us is so full that he will never let us down.

And don't forget this: when we lose a battle, when we give in and sin against God, the one who won the victory is there to heal and restore us. Jesus is there to cover us again with his perfect life and to absolve us from our sins.

We fight knowing that we are not alone. The same Jesus who fought off Satan's temptations and won is with us to help us in the fight. Why do we come here to church to hear good news of God's love for us? Why do we receive his body and blood? Because his love and forgiveness make us strong and resolute to fight.

We fight with the end in sight. The victory is ours right now, don't get me wrong. But we don't feel it yet. Make no mistake, though, the day is coming when we will. The ultimate victory experience is coming when we will stand with resurrected and glorified bodies in the presence of Jesus, in joy and happiness forever.

Do you see the pattern for every child of God? Fierce battles now, for here on this earth we are like Jesus, denying ourselves and carrying our crosses. But the victory is already decided, and the full experience of it is coming. Meanwhile, Jesus gives us a tantalizing foretaste through his Supper and his Word.

It's the life story of the Son of God. It's the life story of every child of God. Fierce battle, but ultimate victory. Amen.

*Lord our strength, the battle of good and evil rages within and around us, and our ancient foe tempts us with his deceits and empty promises. Keep us steadfast in your Word, and when we fall, raise us up again and restore us through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen*