

First Sunday in Lent
February 13, 2005
Matthew 4: 1-11

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

The Devil Can't Harm Us

1. Because Jesus, our Substitute, Overcame Him
2. Because Jesus, our Example, Equipped Us

NIV Matthew 4:1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.² After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.³ The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."⁴ Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple.⁶ "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"⁷ Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.⁹ "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"¹¹ Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In a nationwide poll of American Christians, the Barna Research Group found not long ago that 59% of the churchgoers they surveyed did not believe that Satan is a real, personal being. Nearly 3 in 5 American Christians tended to believe instead that the devil is a symbol of evil rather than a personal being.

But it was no mere symbol of evil that Jesus went out into the Judean desert to confront here in Matthew 4. The devil we meet here is capable of thought and speech and movement. In a carefully planned strategy, he converses with Jesus—speaks very cunningly—and leads Jesus from the desert to the city of Jerusalem and from there to a high

mountain. This is the enemy that the Bible calls “a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” Jesus has barely been baptized and the devil is already stalking him. And he would continue stalking. During Jesus’ Passion, Satan was hard at work. He exerted his evil influence and led Peter to deny Jesus and Judas to betray him. He was working his evil schemes on Pontius Pilate and King Herod and the members of the Jewish Sanhedrin as well.

So how can I title this message **The Devil Can’t Harm Us**? Maybe it should be The Devil *Can* Harm Us. Given the power, intelligence and determination of the devil—not to mention a crime blotter with entries dating back to the Garden of Eden--it certainly appears that the devil is more than capable of doing us harm. But this morning we see Jesus, our Substitute, win a great victory over Satan. And more than, we’ll see that, Jesus, the Victor over the devil, has equipped us to resist and defeat the devil, too.

1. Because Jesus, our Substitute, Overcame Him

It says here, “*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.*” You and I have prayed repeatedly that God would not lead us into temptation, but here it says that the Spirit of God led Jesus out into the desert to be tempted by the devil. It was God’s will for Jesus to go out into the desert and face the devil as our Substitute. And Jesus knew exactly what he was up against. Satan, that fallen angel, is the father of lies. With his lies the Tempter had led the first Adam into the sin that ruined God’s flawless Creation. Now he was going to do his best to corrupt the second Adam. It starts with something that almost seems harmless. “*If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.*” Jesus was physically weakened by this time. For nearly six weeks he had eaten nothing. Under those circumstances, Satan’s suggestion almost seems like common sense. “You’re hungry. You’ve got the power. Turn these stones into loaves of bread!” But can you imagine how differently the Gospels—particularly the Passion History—would read if Jesus resorted to his divine powers every time he came up against something that smacked of humiliation? Why would Jesus let the soldiers bind him or strike him or affix him to the cross? He’s the Son of God; he could say the word and alleviate not only hunger but any other potential suffering as well. But then what would become of God’s plan for his Son to suffer and die on our behalf?

The second temptation was to do something more spectacular. The devil took Jesus to the highest point of Herod’s temple in Jerusalem, a perch that would be something like standing on the roof of the

Doubletree Hotel downtown. Imagine, the devil is asking Jesus, that you do a swan dive from this pinnacle. As you hurtle toward impact, the angels of God will suddenly appear to catch and you won't be harmed. God promised that he'd send his angels, didn't he? And wouldn't a spectacular feat like that be preferable to being impaled on a cross. Why, you'd get all of the gain with none of the pain! But it was just another ploy to prevent Jesus from keeping his appointment at the cross.

In the third temptation, the devil takes Jesus higher, but stoops lower. In an outrageously bold frontal attack, he takes Jesus to a high mountain and shows him "*all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.*" Then, he lies, "*All this I will give you if you will bow down and worship me.*" Now the Bible does call the devil "the prince of this world" (John 12:31) and it even says that "**the whole world is under the control of the evil one,**" (1 John 5:19) but this is still our Father's world. "**The earth is the LORD's and everything in it,**" the Bible says (Ps. 24:1). It's not Satan's to bequeath to anyone, but that didn't stop him from acting as though he could.

Now look at how Jesus responded to each temptation. He flatly refused each suggestion. There was no wavering, no pondering, no sense that he was intrigued by the temptation. He didn't eat. He didn't leap. He didn't bow down and call Satan his Lord. But Jesus did more than refuse. He cited a Scripture passage as the basis for each refusal. Jesus wouldn't turn stones into bread because it is written in Deuteronomy 8 that it's not bread alone that keeps us alive, but the creating, sustaining word of God by which we live. Jesus wouldn't leap from the pinnacle of the temple because it's written in Deuteronomy 6 that we are not to test the LORD our God, and that includes testing his promise to protect us. And Jesus wouldn't bow down and worship the devil because in Deuteronomy 6 the LORD tells us that our worship is to be reserved exclusively for him. Jesus was guided entirely by the Word. He let the Word serve as his response. In the end Satan has to retreat in defeat. His best efforts have failed to corrupt Jesus.

That's not how it always goes with you and me, is it? Too often we've swallowed Satan's lies. As he did in the Garden, he makes sin seem attractive or nourishing or sophisticated. And then, not long after we've succumbed to his blandishments, he puts away his friendly guise and plays the Accuser. "You call yourself a Christian? Why, look at you! You're a disgrace! You're not worthy of God's mercy." If he can't get us to think we don't need God, he'll work to get us to believe

God doesn't want us. But always and only his goal is to keep us from heaven and destroy our souls.

That's why Jesus' victory over Satan in these temptations is so significant. This is Jesus' active obedience. He was here obeying the law in our place, perfectly complying with God's will even as Satan stood at his elbow urging him to do otherwise. Now, through faith, Jesus gives his holy record of spotless obedience to all who call him their Savior. He is our holiness. He is our righteousness, so that we can stand pure and unashamed before our just God. Let Satan rage all he wants, he can't make his accusations stick against those whom God has justified. As St. Paul says in Romans 8, **"Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us."** (8:33-34) This is the victory song of all those who wear the robe of Christ's righteousness.

So the devil has gone down to defeat, not just when he tried to tempt Jesus, but on Good Friday and on Easter morning. His condemnation has been written, signed and delivered. And yet he's still a force. He's still stalking and prowling. It's true that he's been chained with the gospel of Jesus, but he can still do damage to those who venture inside the radius of his chain. Here again, though, as believers in Jesus, we can say that the devil can't harm us. He can't harm us because Jesus, our example, has equipped us.

2. Because Jesus, Our Example, Has Equipped Us

It's no secret that our government has agencies like the FBI and the CIA that spend a great deal of time and money studying the enemies of our country. The operative principle is that if you want to defend against your enemy, you've got to know him. That's true with Satan, too, and the devil's temptations of Jesus give us some good examples of how Satan does his work. First, you notice that the devil didn't approach Jesus until the Lord had been in the desert for forty days. Jesus was weak with hunger by that time. Satan can be very patient in looking for an opening to tempt us. Weakness is his ally. In Jesus' case it was weakness brought on by hunger, but Satan's not choosy. He'll use any kind of weakness as an opening. Maybe we're spiritually weak from being away from the Word and Sacrament. Maybe we're emotionally weak from some extended struggle. It could be a big workload or a huge plate of responsibilities that leave us vulnerable. It could be unrepented sin or simmering anger. Satan looks for any weakness.

Second, on the “know-your-enemy” list: Satan can quote Scripture. Those who have only a passing familiarity with the Bible will find themselves at a tremendous disadvantage when Satan comes tempting because he’s done his homework. He knows what the Bible says. He’s also not shy about misquoting it, when that’s to his advantage, as here with Psalm 91. God promised to command his angels concerning us *to guard us in all our ways*. He didn’t tell us that we could go bungee jumping without a bungee cord and depend on his angels to break our fall. Time and again Satan gets the upper hand by pulling a Scripture passage out of context and using it to encourage disobedience against something else that God has said. Here’s a common example: “God is a loving God, isn’t he?” (Yes, that’s what the Bible says.) “Well, how could a loving God...(fill in the blank...command me to not to do something that makes me happy...tell me I’m a sinner... send someone to hell?” Only as we grow in grace and learn the Scriptures can we gain the ability detect Satan’s misuse of Scripture.

Third, no one gets a pass from Satan. If the devil could be so brazen as to urge the King of kings to commit idolatry, he won’t blink at tempting Christians to do the most outrageous things, just on the off chance that he might succeed. The most frightening thing about that statistic that says that 59% of American Christians don’t believe that the devil is real, is that their ignorance of his existence allows him to operate in stealth mode. They are essentially unaware that he’s marked them for destruction and is constantly plotting to deceive them. It’s a huge advantage for Satan when he can operate undetected.

I suppose by this time you might be feeling a bit overmatched. Satan is, after all, more powerful than any flesh-and-blood enemy—the Stalins and Hitlers and Hussein’s of this world are weak by comparison. He and his demons are “**the powers of this dark world**” and “**the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms,**” according to the Bible. And yet Jesus has equipped us so that the devil can’t harm us. Luther had it right in “A Mighty Fortress.” The devil is judged. The deed is done. One little word can fell him. That word is the Word we have, the Word of God, the sword of the Spirit. Those who believe God’s promise of forgiveness of sins wear breastplate (bulletproof vest) of righteousness. With the shield of faith we can ward off his arrows of temptation. In addition, God has pledged himself to hear our prayers and for that reason Satan fears the prayers of God’s saints. Prayer provides a protective cover that

Satan can't penetrate. And, finally, there's this great comfort: our Lord Jesus, the Victor over Satan, is seated at the right hand of God in the heavenly realms where he has all things under his feet and is the head over everything for his church.

Is the devil real? By the consistent testimony of the Bible, the devil is not only real, but powerful, intelligent, and very determined to prevent us from going to heaven. It's important to know that there is such an enemy of our souls. And yet it is also true that that Satan cannot harm those who trust in Jesus. Through faith in Jesus we share his victory over Satan and through Jesus' example we know how to stand firm in the face of Satan's attacks. Amen.