

### “Hold Firmly to the Faith”

I haven't been tempted in that way, and I doubt that you have either. I haven't stood face to face with Satan and have him utter his temptations directly into my ears. I've never spent forty days fasting in the wilderness for the very purpose of facing such temptation head on. I can't even really imagine what it would be like to see in an instant all of the kingdoms of the world and to be offered their authority and splendor. Of course, I am speaking about Jesus' experience as recorded in today's Gospel. Forty days of temptation...three examples highlighted by Scripture...and through it all, Jesus stood firm and responded with God's Word.

No, I haven't seen those exact temptations, but the temptations I face are often similar. In fact, while it may well be true that no two temptations are exactly alike, many aspects of temptation have remained constant throughout human history. Ultimately, temptation comes down to this: are you going to listen to what God has told you in his Word, or are you going to listen to his enemy, Satan? We heard about the aftermath of one such temptation in our Old Testament lesson this morning. Achan had faced this choice: would he listen to God's instruction to devote everything in Jericho to the Lord, or would he keep even a little bit for himself? After all, who would it hurt? Who would even know about it?

We also face temptations constantly. We fall to them frequently. You heard in our First Lesson how God's anger burned against Achan. Do we really expect it to be any different for us?

The only reason God's anger doesn't burn against us constantly is Jesus. That is why the book of Hebrews turns our attention to him and away from anything or anyone else time and time again. That's why our sermon text today turns our eyes to him and urges us: “Hold firmly to the faith.” What God has given to us is what we need in the face of any temptation or any trial or any difficulty. Don't let Satan, or anyone else, or anything else, take your confidence away from him. Hold firmly.

Hold firmly to our great high priest. The high priest in the Old Testament was the one who oversaw the sacrifices at the Temple. He was the only one who once a year could enter into the Most Holy Place of the Temple, where the Ark of the Covenant was located. He did so on the Day of Atonement, bringing with him the blood of the sacrifices on behalf of himself, the priests, and all of the people.

But the high priest spoken of here was no ordinary high priest. This is a **“great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God.”** And listen to what makes him so special. He was tempted, but was without sin. The three examples highlighted in today's Gospel are merely that, examples out of the lifelong string of temptations hurled toward Jesus by the enemy. Every one of them he withstood. Through every one he honored God and held firmly to his Word. Against every single temptation, he prevailed.

And so he stands out not only among high priests, but he also stands out from us. In our weakness, we have so often succumbed to temptation. We have too often set aside God's direction for our hearts' desires. A few examples that may ring true: as you browse the internet how many unwholesome options are flashed before your eyes? So many items that clearly fail to attain the standard of purity that God demands. His Word says to flee from temptation, but the devil whispers, “There's no one around. No one will ever know. It won't hurt anyone just to see what's there.”

The drink that is offered or available to you...are you ready to take appropriate precautions and to see to it that you don't let yourself get out of control? Or if you know that drinking to excess is a weakness that you have, don't you have to say that one is one too many? But the devil offers the argument, “You're just trying to have fun or fit in.”

Cheat on your taxes, take an extra long break when you know you should be working, and no one will miss a few small items if you could really use them at home. In all sorts of circumstances and in all sorts of

ways Satan offers us ample opportunity to fall, and we find ample opportunity to take him up on his offer.

That's why you need the great high priest. All of the sacrifices offered up throughout the Old Testament find their fulfillment in him. All the work of those priests was leading up to this one: that the great high priest offered himself as a sacrifice for sin, once for all time, once for all the world. That is why he lived the sinless life—for you. That is why he faced temptation—because you do. That is why he is so great—because he paid the ultimate price for sin, the only price that could ever be enough, his very own precious body and blood. And with his work complete, he rose from the dead and ascended victoriously “through the heavens.” This is Jesus. This is the great high priest. Hold firmly to him!

And through him approach the throne of grace. As our text reads, **“Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”** Because of all that Christ has done for us, we have confidence. It is the same sort of confidence that the Scripture urges when it says, **“What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?”** If Jesus has already withstood all of Satan's temptations, if he has lived a perfect life and died an innocent death for us, if he has risen from death and ascended into heaven, what is going to stop him from bringing us to his side? What should intimidate us? What reason do we have to hesitate at all in approaching him?

None at all. In fact, he promises that as we approach his gracious throne, we will receive his mercy and his grace. Mercy means that God looks at us even in our lowliness and desires to help us. Grace means that God's love to us is completely undeserved, that it depends only on him and not on anything in us. That is what we find as we approach God's throne.

Certainly, we approach God's throne through prayer. In any time of need, in any temptation, in any situation at all, God is ready and eager to listen to us and to respond with his love. Nothing stands in the way of our prayers prayed in the name of Jesus our great high priest.

And we approach God's gracious throne to receive his mercy and love as we consider and meditate on and study his Word. In his Word is where we find the good news of our salvation, the good news of our great high priest. That is why at Grace we offer regular opportunities for worship and Bible study. And now during the season of Lent, there are additional opportunities to gather around God's Word and to meditate on it.

But this text is about much more than just what we do at church. This is an offer to each and every one of us to approach God at any time and in any place, boldly confessing our sins and repenting of them, confident that his forgiveness is ours through our great high priest.

And this is something worth holding on to. The entire book of Hebrews was written to encourage Christians who were being persecuted to hold on to their faith. Many considered returning to their old ways in Judaism, back to offering sacrifices and following restrictive laws. But that was both unnecessary and unwise. In Christ they had a great high priest. They had everything that they would ever need. That's what we have, too.

In addition to the temptations to sin that he casts in our way, the devil would like nothing better than to find other worldviews and philosophies for us to follow. He would like nothing better than for us to turn away from Christianity in favor of worldly wisdom, pleasure, or anything else that would separate us from the love of God that is in Christ. That is why we joined in this prayer today: “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.”

Jesus is our great high priest. He faced the devil and his boldest temptations, and he came away victorious on our behalf. Hold firmly to him. Hold firmly to the faith.



The Text: Hebrews 4:14–16 (NIV84)

<sup>14</sup> Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. <sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. <sup>16</sup> Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.