

“For Us Fights the Valiant One”

It was a strange conversation in a strange place. It strains our imaginations a bit to think about the details. What exactly did this encounter look like? How did the devil appear? What was the manner in which he took Jesus to various places or showed him all the kingdoms of the world with all their splendor? Why did he offer Jesus these particular temptations? And why is what happened to Jesus in his wilderness temptation so different from anything that we experience today?

I'm sure we won't answer all of these questions to anyone's satisfaction today. I can only guess what the devil looked like when he faced off with Jesus. I have a picture in my mind's eye of some of what went on, but other details I've never really even tried to imagine. For what it's worth, the picture on the front cover of this morning's worship folder is an actual photograph from one part of the Judean wilderness, though I couldn't tell you the exact location of Jesus' temptation or assure you how closely it matched what the picture shows.

But what I can tell you with absolute certainty is that this conversation was much more than a conversation. It may sound to us like a cordial discussion, but in reality this was a battle. This was a fight for the souls of mankind. This was a confrontation between good and evil. It wasn't the first battle. It wouldn't be the last, either. This account is recorded for us in Scripture not only once, but three times by the evangelists, because it was a vital battle. And that is why it has our attention today on the First Sunday in Lent.

But, also appropriately, our attention first turned this morning to what was the first battle in the war for souls. To us, this was also a strange conversation in a strange place. In a paradise of Eden that we cannot even begin to comprehend, the devil whispered to Eve those famous words, “Did God really say?” He paraded in front of her and Adam the delicious-looking fruit. He held out to them the promise of knowledge and status. He convinced them that in spite of every evidence to the contrary, it was not in their best interest to listen to God and to obey him. And the result was shame and fear and envy and selfishness and death.

But into that changed world God spoke. He said to the devilish serpent: **“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”**

Thousands of years later, Jesus of Nazareth stepped into the waters of the Jordan River. When John baptized him, heaven itself opened, the Holy Spirit descended on him, and the Father's voice declared him the Father's beloved Son.

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. This was no accident or coincidence. The Holy Spirit who anointed Jesus empowered him for his task and led him to the battleground. There in the wilderness he fasted forty days and forty nights. And he was hungry.

The first attack from Satan came. **“If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”** You don't need to worry about what God expects of you. You don't need to trust him to provide all that you need. You are more than a mere human being. You have the power to make food out of even these rocks, don't you? Just do it. You don't need to be hungry.

Does the challenge sound familiar? Does Satan ever whisper in your ear that God can't or won't provide what you need? Does he invite you to do whatever it takes to make just a little more money, because that's where true security is found?

There was more in the devil's arsenal with which to attack Jesus. **Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “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.’”** Prove it! Here's your

chance. Show me how much God loves you. Show me how powerful he is. You don't have to take it on faith. You don't have to simply believe that God loves you without any proof or without any evidence. Test him. Make sure.

And one more time the adversary attacked. **Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."** The whole world can be yours. Every bit of splendor that it contains can be your very own possession. All you have to do is bow down and worship me.

You know, and I'm glad that you do, how this battle turned out. But I want you to pause with me before we look at the rest of the story. Just think about these temptations. Think how similar they are to the temptation in the Garden of Eden. Realize how similar they are to the temptations that you and I face each day. There are battles that rage constantly within our own lives. Every day Satan is eager to put in front of us opportunities to doubt God and to test God. All around us he offers idols that we can bow down and worship instead of the true God.

Adam and Eve ate the fruit. It looked good. It could help them. It could make them more than they were. How often have you and I done the same thing? How often have you let the tempter convince you that God didn't know what he was talking about, that he didn't have your best interest in mind, or that he simply couldn't help you out of the sort of trouble that you had gotten yourself into? Oh sure, the specifics are going to vary widely. For some, the temptation is to pursue pleasure over responsibility, to do what feels right even when we know it isn't right. For some, the temptation is to worship the god of science as teachers insist that millions and billions of years is all it takes for this world to become what it has. Instead, the Bible invites us to worship the true God who created all things by his powerful word.

And central to all of these temptations is the need to twist and distort, or to flatly ignore, the word of God. In our lives, the devil often hides behind surrogates to accomplish his temptations. For example, God has spoken plainly that abortion is murder, that marriage is for a man and a woman, and that intimate relationships should be saved for marriage. But the world around us, a world that has a profound influence on us, generally holds the opposite position.

And not only are we tempted, but we also often fail. Along with Adam and Eve, along with all of their sin-tainted descendants, we have been born in sin and all too often continue to wallow in it. As Martin Luther put it in his Reformation hymn, as we just sang, "With might of ours can naught be done; Soon were our loss effected" (CW 201:2). They lost. We lose. We need a champion to fight the battle for us.

"But for us fights the valiant one Whom God himself elected. You ask, 'Who is this?' Jesus Christ it is, The almighty Lord. And there's no other God; He holds the field forever" (CW 201:2). And Luther captured in that poetry precisely what was taking place in the wilderness. Jesus, God's chosen servant, true God and true man, was fighting and winning the battle on our behalf. He didn't cave into temptation. He didn't listen to the devil. He didn't try to shortcut his way to power and glory. He didn't even seek his own comfort in the face of suffering. He turned to the true words of God in Scripture and one by one shot down Satan's attacks.

"It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

"It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

"Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

And the devil, defeated, left him. No, this was not the last time Satan tempted Jesus. But every temptation that Jesus faced, he conquered. Our valiant one fought triumphantly. He lived a flawless life so that he could die an innocent death. He succeeded in our place in order to give us eternal life. This battle with Satan led to that great battle at the cross, where the descendant of the woman crushed the serpent's head.

Though we will face battles with Satan, we have this confidence: the valiant one has won the ultimate victory. He continues to fight for us and equips us to fight as he did, by holding firmly to God's Word to resist the devil's attacks. May our Lenten walk draw us closer to God's Word and to our Lord and Savior.

The Text: Matthew 4:1–11 (NIV84)

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.