

The First Sunday in Lent – 2020

Genesis 3:1-21

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

During Epiphany, I was teaching the preschool kids about our Lord's miracles in chapel. Teaching little kids is a ton of fun and I like getting on their level and dreaming up things to say and do that turn the gears in their heads. All this is in service of the Gospel. During Epiphany I wanted them to see that Jesus is true God and true Man in one person. So, we reprised the miracle of the great catch of fish, the healing of paralytic and raising Jairus' daughter, among others. A few times during each chapel lesson I would say, "hands on cheeks, eyes big and wide, open up your mouth and say..." At this point, all the children would enthusiastically say: "It's a miracle." "Who does miracles?" At this question they would respond: "Jesus does." I would conclude this happy dialogue with the beautiful theological truth that Jesus opens the eyes of our hearts to see that He is true God and true Man in one person.

Epiphany ended last week and the lessons turned to Lent – specifically Ash Wednesday. I was busily cleaning everything in sight to start a lesson on how God cleans our soul. Sin and death were discussed, repentance, Christ's blood, why the church was draped in black – all these Lenten themes. I even had a teacher who had already been to service that morning and ashes in the shape of a cross was on her forehead. At the end of the chapel lesson, in a little tidbit intended for the teachers, I said that I was giving up beer for Lent. Just then a young lass said: "It's a miracle!" The teachers got a big bang out of that.

That little girl knows Lutherans too well. Lent is a very good time for self-discipline, but this is not merely a seasonal virtue, not simply a seasonal pursuit. The last in the list of fruits of the Spirit is self-control. How many of you have mastered self-control? None, I suspect. That is no reason why it should not be demonstrated in your life. You are a Christian. Self-discipline is nothing less than putting to death the misdeeds of the body. You have carnal appetites that are part of your sinful nature. These are to be addressed... by you. You have renounced Satan and all his works and all his ways. The Spirit of God lives in you. St. Paul was aware of his own unhappy propensities and took proactive measures to align his life with God's design. He wrote this: "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. Athletes train to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified" (1 Corinthians 9:25-27).

In the book of Romans, the issue is presented even more starkly. "For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (Romans 8:13-14). A lifestyle marked by personal refusal to repudiate sin or a refusal to exert self-control over your carnal appetites is not a Christian lifestyle and faith is radically at risk. And let's be clear about one thing: engaging in personal self-discipline is not to resign yourself to a life of lukewarm broth and washed out color. There is joy to be found there, in denying yourself, in training your mind and your body in pursuit of the imperishable wreath of eternal life (2 Timothy 4:8; James 1:12; 1 Peter 5:4; Revelation 2:10). Peace of mind. What kind of a blessing is that?! Peace of mind.

The writer to the Hebrews puts it perfectly. “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11).

Immediately after He was baptized, Jesus was driven by the Spirit out into the desert. A conflict was in the offing. Long had God planned this, a recapitulation of a former defeat. In that former defeat, Adam had proven himself vulnerable. He was in the advantageous position of the Garden of Delights. Not a need was unmet. And Satan came whispering lies – theological lies. “Did God actually say...?” Eve entertained the lies and reached out her hand. Adam ate what he was commanded not to eat and then found a way to blame his wife. Sin and death washed the land. Man was banished from paradise. Hell won a race of slaves – sinful man held by right to the kingdom of darkness. Jesus was out in the desert to reprise that ancient defeat, to turn defeat back to victory.

Jesus is tempted not in an advantageous position, but in a remarkably disadvantageous position. Fasting in the wilderness, fasting and under duress, fasting and humanly vulnerable to hunger, Jesus is tempted. Satan uses his ancient tactics. “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread” (Matthew 4:3). Satan says “If you are the Son of God” because immediately prior, at Jesus’ baptism, God said: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). There is more here in this temptation than merely eating bread. There is more here than Jesus being tempted to perform a self-serving miracle. The Lord Christ is on a path, a road to Golgotha and the Holy Cross. This confrontation in the desert is a preview of a coming all-out war. In the Garden of Eden, God pronounced a curse on the serpent’s head and prophesied about His Son, the seed of the woman.

It is a bloody prophecy, a conflict of the highest order. “I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Genesis 3:15). At every step where man has failed, this seed of the woman will succeed. The end of that human road is the cross. Jesus disciplines Himself to come to that place as His Father intended, as the righteous substitute for all of us. What is running through Jesus’ heart and mind as He contends for us beneath Satan’s temptation? God’s Word, God’s blessed Word, God’s authoritative, powerful and applicable Word. “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:4). “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test’” (Matthew 4:7). “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve’” (Matthew 4:10).

Jesus was tempted like you (Hebrews 4:15). He knows the grim cloud of Satan’s evil, those alluring temptations to feed a selfish appetite, to turn away from God and His Word, to indulge in unholy actions. He knows the temptations but He was pure, undefiled; He remained chaste and sober and humble and faithful. In your place, He endured all the things where you and I have failed. And He took that righteousness of His and He sacrificed it on an altar, the altar of the cross, crushing the head of the serpent. He took that righteousness of His and He sacrificed on an altar, the altar of the cross so that He might be able to bestow on you all of His righteousness, so that He might pay for all your failures. And paid they are – His blood speaks on your behalf. His blood speaks a righteous word on your behalf. Justified! Forever and ever,

you are justified before God by way of Christ's all-encompassing work of redemption. In the Father's eyes, you are perfect for Christ's blood speaks on your behalf. It is a miracle! It's a miracle of the highest order. You are saved, set free from your sin and your death, the kingdom of heaven is open to you, and Christ's blood has made you holy.

Man does not live by bread alone but by Christ alone. This crucified and risen Savior gives us His righteousness in, with and under the bread and wine of His body and blood. We live by the Words that came out from His mouth, all throughout His ministry, but especially those He spoke as He was pierced: "Father, forgive them." Be gone, Satan. This congregation is the flock of Christ the King. His Word and His sacraments give us the fullness of His righteousness. He is the Son of God and we are His forgiven people. To Him be glory forever and ever.