

The First Sunday in Lent – 2021

Genesis 22:1-18

James 1:12-18

Mark 1:9-15

I've been trick-or-treating but I've never been to a masquerade party. Masquerade parties are mostly for the rich and famous which I happily neither. A Masquerade party: don a costume, some frilly French 16th century regalia, put a mask over your face and pretend that you are something that you are not. Fat Tuesday was last week. Fat Tuesday is what the day before Ash Wednesday is called. "Mardi Gras" is French for Fat Tuesday. The reason that they call it "Fat" is because it is supposedly the last day for eating rich, fatty foods before the Lenten exercise of fasting and self-restraint brings a halt to such indulgence. How many of y'all believe that the typical Mardi Gras reveler is sincerely enjoying a last bit of culinary delights before they embrace a season of self-restraint, a season of fasting, a season of faithful Christian discipline?

Trick-or-treating was the one time a year that a kid could totally dress-up, masquerade as Fran Tarkenton, or Count Dracula, or Snow White or Pat Benetar (Halloween – October 31st). It would be kind of weird though if the girl who sits in front of you in algebra showed up dressed like Pat Benetar on November 1st. Uh, masquerade is over missy. I don't thing any of y'all would be fooled if I came to church next week dressed like Indiana Jones. "You silly goof, who do you think that you are? Take off that hat, and where'd you get that whip, anyway?"

The Scripture says that Satan masquerades as angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14). The Lord Christ is under no delusion as to who Satan is. "The devil was a murderer from the beginning. He has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). Satan *masquerades* as one who will help, one who offers genuine assistance. But his candy bars have razors in them. Satan cloaks naked evil in attractive garments... and people buy it. Abortion is offered as a solution for women who feel greatly distressed and who fervently look for an answer. Planned Parenthood is carrying Satan's water – calling evil good and good evil. "Don't give the devil a foothold" (Ephesians 4:27).

As Jesus approached the wilderness, the devil's haunt, Satan must have been confident. Man had proven himself to be little match for this world's prince. This cosmic struggle had been played out before. Adam, the crown of God's good creation, caved with astoundingly meager resistance. "Did God really say, 'you must not eat from any tree in the Garden?'" With craft and dreadful might, he arms himself to fight (A Mighty Fortress Is Our God – Martin Luther). Think of it: how many times have you been tempted and failed? How many times? As Jesus approached, Satan must have been confident. The good woman was equally lame. "You will not surely die" the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5). The good woman reached out her hand, took some of the fruit, and ate. When Satan was confronted by Christ, true Man, Satan must have been confident.

This appointment was one that had been on Jesus' books for a very long time. At every juncture where man failed, the Son of Man comes to be victorious. To be sure, the Son of God had an

appointment to keep. Fresh from His baptism, still dripping Jordan water, Jesus is driven by the Spirit out into the desert. A confrontation is in the offing. Temptation; it would start here. Temptation; it would be addressed here. The Scripture is adamant: "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:18). In this recapitulation of an ancient conflict, comforts would be few. The wilderness, not the lush Garden of Eden, was where Jesus, the second, greater Adam, would confront Temptation. It was a Lenten scene. Lent is forty days long. Lent is a season of deprivation. When you deprive yourself of something that you really crave, you are forced to say "No" to yourself. How good are you at that?

Saying "No" to yourself is called self-restraint. The world and our sinful flesh, they are gluttons. Lent is that season of the liturgical calendar when the church tells the world that life in this world is not as important as life with Christ. The world needs to hear it and you need to say it. Christians are to say it and Christians are to live it. Lent is that time in the church year when the church is bold to say that we would gladly give it all up for Him. "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). Those are not abstract words. Jesus deprived Himself, denied Himself and He met Temptation. "He was tempted like us in every way, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:14). He prevailed.

This is our captain – He holds the field forever, our field, our lives, and our future. No foothold was found for the devil in Christ's armor. No weakness was found in Christ's fidelity to His Father, His allegiance to you. Jesus' triumph in the wilderness is a piece of a greater whole. Jesus' triumph in the wilderness over Temptation is one aspect of a complete victory. Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God (Matthew 27:40). Do you recall those words? That was Satan's voice emanating from the mouth of man. Jesus' victory on the cross, His steadfast fidelity to life, even to the point of death, kept Him there, fully there, completely and beautifully there – on the cross. *That* is a triumph. The demonic foothold that Christ suffered was a spike. Jesus welcomed that driven spike through His beautiful foot, because His death on that cross would be the exorcism of Satan. "Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:31-32). The sinless Son of God is lifted high upon a cross and Satan's head is crushed. It is precisely as you sang a moment ago: "For us fights the Valiant One whom God Himself elected."

Temptation; it is defeated. Not by you but by your Lord. Believe it. Trust it. Speak it to those who fail. That crucified King brings His kingdom to you. Through this very Word, the Lord is present with His victory and you receive by grace something that you could never earn. Satan is defeated. Temptation is not the power that rules us – the risen King brings forgiveness and new life. Our Father does not lead us into temptation. He delivers us from evil. By His Spirit, He leads us into the One who conquered Temptation for us. What none of us could do, Christ has done for us. What belongs to Him belongs to you. His victory is yours and you have it! Here, now, without caveat, no strings, absolute gift, true and pure and present – victory! On the Last Day, when Christ returns, you will have that victory in radical fullness. When you fall prey to temptation, flee to the One who died for you, who rose again, who serves you with His victory in His body and blood; flee to Him immediately.

Let Christ's words echo in this holy house: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15).