

The First Sunday in Lent, February 21, 2021

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Baptism, Temptation, and Hope

Mark 1:9–15

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

After Jesus' baptism, **the Spirit immediately drove Him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And He was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to Him** (vv 12–13).

What's the first thing, the very first thing, that happens to Jesus after His baptism?

- It's not a miracle. Jesus doesn't rise from baptism and immediately turn water into wine or heal the blind or feed five thousand.
- It's not preaching. Jesus doesn't rise from baptism and immediately begin to proclaim the kingdom of God or call sinners to repentance or preach in parables.
- It's not calling disciples. Jesus doesn't rise from baptism and immediately call Peter, Andrew, James, and John to be fishers of men.

Jesus is baptized, and the very next thing in this: **The Spirit immediately drives Him out into the wilderness** where He is **tempted by Satan** (v 12). Satan tempts.

SATAN TEMPTS US TO DESPAIR,
BUT OUR HOPE IS IN JESUS CHRIST, WHO TRIUMPHED OVER SATAN.

I.

It's a bit unsettling to think that baptism is immediately followed by temptation, especially on a Sunday when we have the joy of witnessing a baptism and of remembering our own. Isn't baptism supposed to protect us and keep us safe? Don't we believe that baptism rescues *from* the devil and gives eternal salvation? Well, yes we do. Both. But baptism doesn't mean we'll lead a charmed life. It rescues from the devil, but it doesn't get rid of temptation. It gives eternal salvation, but it doesn't make us invincible. There's no baptismal force field around us Christians. Far from it. Satan puts his target on the baptized. That's why St. Peter, writing to Christians, calls the devil a roaring, ravenous lion and tells us to resist him (1 Pet 5:8, 9). That's why St. James describes temptation as the womb of sin. Sin is conceived and born when our desires lure and entice us. **When it is fully grown it brings forth death** (Jas 1:15). Baptism

doesn't mean we can put our shields down. Instead, Baptism calls us to be ever vigilant and watchful. Keep those shields up!

What does Satan want with us? He wants to deceive and mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice.¹ Of those three—false belief, despair, and other shame and vice—the one I want us to be most aware of today is despair. To despair simply means to lose hope or give up hope. Satan loves despair. In a way, it's all he's got. He's completely outmanned, outgunned, and outmaneuvered by our Lord. He can't compete with Christ. And he knows it. So he falls back on the tactics of guerrilla warfare. Even if he can't really beat us, he can still make it feel like there's no hope. He can make the sky look black. He can make our boots feel heavy. He sneaks out of the jungle and lobs grenades of despair at us. "You think there's forgiveness for *that*?" he cackles. "You think God loves *you*?" he roars. "You think His promises are really *true*?" he snickers. All he has to do is light the fuse of doubt and the despair will ignite. If he can demoralize us and rob us of hope, if he can make us feel unloved and unforgiven, if he can convince us that there's no meaning or purpose, then he's succeeded.

I hate to tell you, but Satan has done well. He's done really, really well. Many *are* despairing. Many are without hope. Way too many. Even Christians. Even here. Despairing about the state of their lives and their homes, their work and their future, their church and their faith, their country and the world. I heard recently about a person who gave a long litany of reasons for despair: the Roman Catholic Church is going down the tubes, they said; the Southern Baptist Convention will be irrelevant in five years; the coronavirus has been politicized; the United States won't be able to stop China; and so on and so forth. If this person had taken notice of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, I'm sure he would've found plenty of reasons for despair in our church body as well.

One tool the devil uses to get us is isolation. We're most vulnerable when we're alone, when we're by ourselves, when we're separated from the flock. The wolf picks off sheep that are by themselves. This is why we should never think of the physical presence of others in our lives as optional. The devil invented the idea that no human contact is required. Just think the impact of this idea on infants in orphanages. Having little or no human contact in their early years impacts the rest of their lives. It is not good that man, woman, or child should be alone. What did Jesus do when the sick were brought to Him? He touched them. Holy Baptism is high touch. It can't be done with just words. Water is necessary. Holy Communion is high touch. It can't be done with just words. Bread and wine are necessary. Our Lord would touch us. He would be close to us. So

¹ Sixth Petition of the Lord's Prayer in [the Small Catechism](#).

we must not believe that true safety is found in social distancing. We need one another. Most of all, we need Him. It's striking— isn't it?— Satan came to tempt Jesus when he had been isolated in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights. We're most vulnerable to despair when we're most isolated— isolated from one another and from the Lord.

The worst part is that too often we've given into it. We've allowed despair to creep in. We've let despair occupy corners of our hearts and souls. We've permitted despair to suck out the joy, hope, and meaning from our lives. Repent! Look the beast in the face and tell him to get lost. Tell Satan that you will *not* despair because your hope is in Christ.

II.

It's because of the temptations we face, because of the target Satan set on us, because of the temptation to despair— it's because of this that the Holy Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness right after His baptism. The Holy Spirit made a point of putting Jesus in the place where He would face temptation. He went into the wilderness for single combat with Satan. He went there to be our champion. He went there to prove that our forgiveness is real, that God's love for us is genuine, that all His promises are true. Jesus entered temptation not only to give us hope but to *be* our hope, to be hope for us. There's a difference between watching someone else battle and thinking, "I can do that, too," versus having someone do battle for you. Jesus isn't just an example for us. He didn't just go out to show us how to defeat the devil. He went there and triumphed over Satan as our champion, our victor. Without Christ, we have no hope, but we aren't without Christ. If we trust in ourselves, then we'll fall into despair, but our trust isn't in ourselves. Not at all. Baptism has joined you to Jesus. Baptism has joined you to the death of Jesus *and* His resurrection *and* His victory over Satan.

Unlike the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mark's Gospel doesn't describe in detail the temptations. You can read Matthew or Luke to see what they are. Mark is short and matter of fact about it. Jesus was tempted by Satan. He wants us to see that temptation didn't just happen once to Jesus. It came repeatedly. Temptation is ongoing thing throughout His ministry. What starts in the wilderness, continues in His ministry as He goes to teach and to heal and to call disciples.

There are, in fact, there particular times when Mark describes Jesus as being tempted/tested. It happened when the Pharisees demanded a sign (Mark 8:11), not because they wanted to believe in Him but because they wanted to embarrass Him. It happened when they tried to trap Him with a question about marriage. Jesus was tempted to disregard God's Word (Mark 10:2). And they tried to trap Him with the

question about what to render to Caesar. They wanted Him to be disloyal to God (Mark 12:15).

We could add to that the mockery He endured on the cross: **“Save yourself, come down from the cross!”** (Mark 15:30). **“He saved others; He cannot save Himself”** (Mark 15:31). **“Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe”** (Mark 15:32). If God loved Him, He would save Him. It was a temptation to despair. All throughout His ministry and culminating on the cross, He engages with that temptation. Satan wants Him to despair, to lose hope, to give up. And you might think that Satan has won when Jesus cries out on the cross, **“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”** (Mark 15:34). But He hasn’t. That’s not a final cry of despair. After all, He’s actually crying to His Father. He expects the Father to hear Him and answer Him. He hasn’t given up the hope of being heard, even in His pain, even staring death in the face, even suffering hell on the cross. And He is vindicated. God raised Him from the dead on the third day. He was not forsaken forever.

III.

There’s no reason to despair. You are in Christ. You are secure and safe in Him. By being joined to Christ’s death, your sins have been washed away. And you have been joined to Jesus’ victory over the devil. And you can be sure that all of God’s promises to you are true.

The thing about hope, however, is that it’s resilient. Hope doesn’t require things to be easy. In fact, when things are easy we often forget about hope entirely. Hope doesn’t require things to be going well. Hope can live in a concentration camp or a prison. Hope can survive pandemics, famines, storms, and wars. Hope can endure masks, cancer, unemployment, divorce, miscarriage, bad rulers, and a host of other things. Wild beasts can’t stop it. We know that because we have the witness of the martyrs. For their faith in Christ, Christians were thrown to the wild beasts. There were times when God didn’t stop the lions’ mouths, like He did for Daniel. But God promised that He would raise them from the dead.

Hope enables us to suffer, struggle, fight, live, and even die. I’m reminded of an anecdote from World War II. When it looked like all of Europe was on the brink at the beginning of war, Winston Churchill said, “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, sweat, and tears.” That was enough. He didn’t promise a victory. He didn’t say it would be easy. He simply gave his people hope.

And so it is for us. Our Lord has come, and He says, “I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, sweat, and tears. My blood. My toil. My sweat. My tears.” This is what He offers to you. And it is enough.

Today we pray that we may finally overcome the devil, the world, and our sinful nature and win the victory. We don’t expect the victory to come by our own power, because we know that we don’t have any. We don’t expect the victory to come by our own ingenuity and skill, because we know that it’s not enough. We expect the final victory to come because the Lord fights for us. Christ Jesus fights for us.

He has achieved through His death and resurrection the victory that we need. He has triumphed over the devil. Satan has nothing on Him. Every time Satan leads you to believe that you cannot be forgiven, take refuge in the blood of Christ. He says, “I died for the forgiveness of your sins.” Every time you aren’t sure that God really loves you, flee for refuge to your Lord. Remember that God so love the world, including each and every one of you, that He gave His only Son to die for you. When you wonder whether God’s promises are true, remember how He raised His beloved Son from the dead and that He promises to raise you as well.

Going through the wilderness is not easy. It’s never easy. It’s a struggle and it’s hard. Yet we aren’t alone in the wilderness, for the Lord is in the wilderness with us. He goes before us and with us and after us. He’s also given us one another to pray for each other, to encourage each other, and to spur one another on. Remember that the people of Israel number in the hundreds of thousands, even a million. The Lord led them and protected them with the pillar of fire and of cloud. We aren’t alone. We have Christ leading us and our brothers and sisters beside us and the saints who have gone before us. Satan cannot have us. Despair will not win. Our hope is in Christ.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
