

The First Sunday in Lent
February 29-March 1, 2020
Matthew 4:1-11

“Deliver Us, Jesus, from Temptation”

The Lenten season is upon us, and the Gospel lesson appointed for this First Sunday in Lent is the same each year: the account of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13). The 40 days of the Lenten season find their origins in the 40 days and nights which Jesus spent praying and fasting in the wilderness; wrestling not only with temptation, but with the tempter himself. In the ancient world, it was widely believed that uninhabited, remote places such as the wilderness were the haunt of demons. It is to this very place that Jesus is led by the Spirit. He doesn’t go unwillingly or grudgingly, but freely. And so Jesus enters into this time of temptation not only for his sake, but for our sake. The preaching series for the Sundays in Lent are taken from the theme of our Lenten devotional booklet from Lutheran Hour Ministries: “Deliver Us: Jesus Sets Us Free.” The message for this First Sunday in Lent, based on the Gospel lesson, is “Deliver Us, Jesus, from Temptation.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

Today’s Old Testament lesson takes us back to the beginning; to the very first temptation in the Garden of Eden, and the fall into sin (Genesis 3:1-21). In truth, not much has changed in our human condition since then. Like Adam and Eve, we are prone to listen to voices other than the Lord God. Like them, we want to be like God; in fact, we want to be God. This remains the first and primary sin of all time. Small wonder, then, that this was the First Commandment which God gave to his people: **“You shall have no other gods before me”** (Exodus 20:3). Those “other gods” could include many things: power, control, money, as well as ourselves. Yes, indeed, we can and do. Not only do we want to know good and evil, we want to be the final authority. We want to be in charge and have control. Like Adam and Eve, we do not know what we are getting ourselves into. Like Adam and Eve, we run and hide from God because we are ashamed. Like Adam and Eve, rather than admit the truth and accept personal responsibility for the mess we have made, we point the finger at others and pin the blame on them. And so the curse placed upon our first parents remains on us to this day, even as we heard when that cross of ashes was placed on our foreheads just days ago: **“By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return”** (Genesis 3:19). And yet, there is hope. With that curse also came a promise as the Lord God spoke to the serpent, that is the devil himself: **“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel”** (Genesis 3:15). Here is the first promise of One who would deliver us all; One who would break the power of sin and temptation. Here is the promise of a Savior.

As we begin this Lenten season, the coronavirus concerns us all. As we know, this has now spread to many parts of the world. Scientists, medical experts, and government leaders are working together to contain the spread of this disease, and we are all asked to take precautions. We will be doing this in our worship services by limiting hand-to-hand contact: no sharing of the peace and the offering will be received at the door. Please take precautions with such basic things as washing your hands, and containing coughs and sneezes. The spread of the coronavirus mirrors what Paul the apostle writes in today’s Epistle lesson: **“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned...”** (Romans 5:12). So, what’s the cure? What is the remedy? We’re waiting for that cure for the coronavirus, and pray that it will soon be found. But the cure for sin is already here: enter Jesus, true God and true man. He came to “reverse the curse” and break the downward, deathward spiral of life in this world since the fall into sin. As Paul writes in the Epistle lesson (Romans 5:12-19): **“Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all**

men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." Jesus knows what it is like to be alone, out in the wilderness, struggling with temptation. We have a Savior who not only gets that, but has done something about it. As the Word of God teaches us: **"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need"** (Hebrews 4:15-16). This is good news for us all.

The Lenten season is a time for us as disciples of Jesus to come face-to-face with the sin and temptation that we face in life. It is real, and the battleground is not "out there" somewhere, but it is here in our mind and heart. The tempter, the deceiver, who led Adam and Eve into sin, who tempted Jesus in the wilderness, knows where our weaknesses are. He holds out the forbidden fruit to each of us. He knows where we are most vulnerable, whether it be anger, gossip, pornography, jealousy, substance abuse, pride, or many other things. Temptations are sure to come our way. We don't have to go looking for them; they find us. And this is what we strive against in our journey of faith, especially during this Lenten season: to see these for what they are as deceptions and lies from Satan, for he is **"the father of lies"** (John 8:44). To recognize the first signs of temptation, which often come when we are alone. Satan's mission was and is **"to steal, and kill, and destroy"** (John 10:10a). And his high value targets are especially those who are marked with the cross of Christ and sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism. That cross puts us in the crosshairs of the enemy. Simply put: his mission is to take us down. Never forget this, but never forget that our hope and our help is in Jesus who has taken the enemy down. By his life and ministry, by his suffering and death upon the cross, the power of the tempter has been broken. The closing verse in today's Gospel lesson says that the devil left Jesus, but he has not left us. The apostle Peter reminds us: **"Be sober; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brethren throughout the world"** (1 Peter 5:8-9). But resist him how? On our own, we don't stand a chance. **"Our help is in the Name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth"** (Psalm 124:8). Our help is only through Jesus. And Jesus comes to us through his Word and Sacraments to give grace to help in time of need. The written Word, the Scriptures, make known to us the living Word, the Word made flesh, and that is Jesus (John 1:14). There is strength and power in that Word for us in the midst of temptation. Hold onto this verse from that Word: **"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it"** (1 Corinthians 10:13). The Lord God comes searching for us today even as he did for Adam and Eve. He comes calling out to us: **"Where are you?"** (Genesis 3:9). He comes searching and calling not to condemn, but to save.

On this First Sunday in Lent, as on every Sunday when Christ's people gather for worship, we pray that prayer which Jesus himself has taught us to pray. As we give thanks for Jesus' victory over sin and temptation, we pray: "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Amen.