

Sermon for Invocavit – Lent 1 (February 26, 2012)
Genesis 3:1-21; 2 Corinthians 6:1-10; Matthew 4:1-11
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Adam and Eve had it made. God created them and placed them in Paradise. They didn't have a care in the world. They lived in a lush garden, surrounded by plenty, lacking nothing. There was no pain, no suffering, no death, all because there was no sin. Work was fulfilling and joyful. And more than that, Adam and his wife had fellowship with the Lord God Himself. He spoke to them, He walked among them. He was their God and they were His people. Everything in the garden was theirs, except for one thing. God had said, "*You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.*" (Gen. 2:16-17) Freely following that one command would demonstrate their love and trust in God, for that was the one thing that belonged to Him alone.

Into the midst of all that good and all that bounty, a serpent crept. And he caused Adam and Eve to doubt the Word of God. He lied to them because, being the father of lies, he could do nothing else. He was the old evil foe, the adversary, the deceiver—Satan. He tempted Adam and Eve, and they caved in to temptation. It all starts with doubting what God says. First, the devil twists the words of God: "*Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?"* Eve corrects him: Well, every one, except one. God said that if we eat of the tree in the midst of the garden, then we will surely die. So then the serpent sows more doubt: "*You will not surely die.*" God knows that when you eat of it, you'll be like God, knowing good and evil! You see, God's really holding out on you. He's keeping you from being like Him. You want to be like Him, don't you? You want to be gods for yourselves, don't you? We all think it would be great if only we could be God! Oh, how marvelous that would be!

All temptation starts with the suggestion, the possibility held before you of thinking, doing or saying something you shouldn't. Then it moves on to delight, thinking of how good it would be to give into the temptation. Eve saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that it was to be desired. Then, finally, temptation moves on to consent: you give in. She took of its fruit and ate, and so did her husband, who was standing there the whole time. And so from there on out, they were cursed. They immediately died spiritually, dead in trespasses and sin, separated from God. They eventually died in body as well. And so, even to this day, we inherit sin and death from our first parents, Adam and Eve. "All mankind fell in Adam's fall."

Of course, Adam blamed the woman God gave Him (and so really he's blaming God), and she blamed the serpent. Everything we do wrong is always someone else's fault, you know. However, according to the order of creation, Adam was responsible as the head of the family. The man is to be the spiritual head of the family. Men have been sleeping on that job ever since Adam. He should have spoken up. That's why we call it "Adam's fall," and why we call our sinful nature "the old Adam." He stood by, and instead of stepping in and putting a stop to the whole thing, he even participated in it, duped by the devil. And we've been being duped by him ever since, constantly falling victim to his lies and temptations.

Along with Adam and Eve we've been barred from Paradise, cursed to return to the dust from which we were taken, after living out our toilsome lives. But we can't say here: "end of story," because in the middle of all those sad, tragic and horrible curses God pronounced, there is also a promise. In Genesis 3:15, when the Lord God is cursing the serpent, He says that He's going to send an offspring of the woman, a man born of woman, who is going to have his heel bruised by the serpent, yet that man will bruise the serpent's head (or "crush" it, as some translations put it). God promised to send someone who would do battle with the serpent and beat him, crushing his loathsome head, for us.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. At this point, Jesus had just been baptized by John in the Jordan River. And the Holy Spirit immediately leads Him (or, as Mark puts it "throws Him") into the wilderness to confront the devil. That is the position Baptism puts you in, by the way; right into conflict with the devil. The moment you are marked and claimed by God, you are Satan's enemy, stuck right in his crosshairs, subject to all the lies and temptations and delusions he can pile on you. Thank God you aren't stuck fighting him alone, but that there's someone who goes to war for you. 1 John 3 tells us: "*The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.*" (1 John 3:8) We see Jesus at work in the wilderness destroying the lies and temptations of the devil by the power of His Word.

Adam and Eve were surrounded by the blessings of God, by unimaginable comfort and abundance, and yet they failed to withstand the temptations of the Evil One. Jesus is in a barren wilderness, having fasted for forty days and forty nights and He will withstand the works of the devil. Jesus is our New Second Adam, the man who succeeds where the first one had failed. He is the faithful Son of God, unlike Adam, unlike Israel, unlike you, unlike me. He is faithful in your place and my place, where you and I are not faithful, resisting temptations that we fall to.

While in the wilderness, the tempter comes to Jesus. Again, just as he did with Adam and Eve, he tries to plant seeds of doubt in Jesus: "*If you are the Son of God...*" "*If...*" Remember that the voice of the Father had just come from heaven at Jesus' baptism and said, "*This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.*" Satan is mocking Jesus, trying to undermine His mission by getting Him to doubt who He is. "Are you really the Son of God? Why are you out here, in this kind of shape, if you're really the Son of God? Would God leave His Son to this?" Satan pulls the same thing on you. "Look at you, how can you be a child of God? You're a sinner, how can God love you? Do you really think a little bit of water splashed on you can wash away your sin?" But you have God's Word on it. "*He who believes and is baptized will be saved.*" The devil cannot rob our faith from us if we trust in God's Word over satanic lies.

Satan tries to take advantage of Jesus by tempting Him with food. "You sure are hungry Jesus. If you're really the Son of God, make some bread out of these stones. That'd be a piece of cake for you!" He wants to tempt Jesus to use His divine power to serve Himself instead of serving those He came to save. He wants to distract Jesus, to get Him to pay more attention to His hunger than to His purpose. Jesus won't have any of it. "*It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*" The Word of God is enough for Jesus. He needs nothing else.

We always want more than the Word. We are more concerned with worldly things like our food and clothing and toys than we are with the Word of God. We think we have better and more important things to do instead of hearing the Word. “The Word doesn’t give me excitement. It doesn’t fill my belly. I could be doing something much more fun.” And so Satan has you in his clutches when you decide that there other things more important than the Word of God. But not so for Jesus. He knows that the Word of God is the one thing that always defeats the devil, and it’s all He uses against him. Notice that. Jesus doesn’t zap the devil with a divine disintegrator ray, or blast him with a bolt of lightning. In every temptation, He only replies, “*It is written...*” and defeats the devil by the power of the Word.

Of course the devil knows the Scriptures too, and he will even use them when it suits his own ends or rather, I should say, he misuses them. In the second temptation, the devil uses a psalm of comfort, about how God sends His angels to protect us and watch over us, and he tries to use it to get Jesus to test God. “God says He’ll protect you, so why don’t you throw yourself down and see if He’ll really do it? C’mon Jesus, if you are the Son of God, make your Father prove it!” Again, Jesus replies with nothing but the Word: “*Again, it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’*” We don’t abuse God’s promises by using them to make God prove Himself. We are to trust God, not test Him, and this Jesus does perfectly. He won’t prove anything with miraculous signs and wonders for people who just want a show.

Finally, the devil attempts his most brazen temptation. He shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and tells Jesus that he will give all this to Jesus, if only Jesus will fall down and worship him. First of all, while the Scriptures do call the devil the “god of this world,” he is limited to what God allows, so he is trying to offer something that isn’t even his to give. He is an inveterate liar. He wants to divert Jesus from the cross by tempting Him to grab for worldly glory instead. “Jesus, you don’t need to operate like this—starving, suffering, and all this kind of stuff! You can have it all! All the glory in the world! If only you’ll worship me, that is!” But Jesus will not be turned from His true mission: to suffer and go to the cross to redeem us, to save us from sin, death, and the power of the devil. “*Be gone, Satan!*” he says. Get out of here! Jesus only serves and does the will of His Father, for as He says, “*it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.’*” And so Jesus does that, for you.

Everything Jesus does, He does to save you. He fasted in the wilderness and withstood the lies of the devil, so that you can feast on the fruits of His cross and hear the Word of Truth. He takes Adam’s place, Israel’s place, your place, and my place and accomplishes what we cannot. Though our human nature was conquered by Satan in the Garden, Satan has been conquered for us by the Second Adam, our Lord Christ, who crushed the head of the serpent by His death on the cross for all our sins. He has won the victory for us to restore us to the Paradise we lost, by defeating the foe who robbed it from us. In Christ, we are “*more than conquers,*” as St. Paul writes, and as it says in Revelation 2, “*To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*” Jesus’ cross has become your tree of life, and every time you eat His Body and drink His blood, you are partaking of the fruits of the very tree of life. Everything you lost in Adam is more than restored in Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God for His Son’s victory, winning us back. In His name, Amen.