

Invocavit  
10 March, Anno Domini 2019  
St. Matthew 4:1-11  
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In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Every good athlete prepares for competition by exercising and proper nutrition. He exercises discipline and trains his body to do what is necessary for success, not what it wants to. In the same way, every soldier practices denying his flesh what it wants, living for a time under battlefield conditions so that when the real battle comes, he is prepared. He doesn't want the suffering and the trial to be unknown or shocking to his body or his mind. He practices exhaustion, hunger, intense pressure, isolation, and any other weakness he may have to endure. He practices the various skills that are necessary in warfare so that they become second-nature to him. The soldier who doesn't practice and prepare is most likely to die under the battle strain because physically and mentally he won't be able to stay standing under the pressure. His strength and stamina will quickly be dried up, he won't know how to respond to attack, he won't be able to endure the pressure and the pain, and he will be an easy kill.

What then, does our Lord Jesus Christ do before he goes toe-to-toe with Satan? No shock - He disciplines Himself. He fasts for forty days, denying Himself fleshly comfort and immediate pleasure. He trains Himself to rely only on the provision of His heavenly Father. He prays. In His need He cries out to God. He prepares for battle. But why? It's not as though there is any question as to the outcome of this first wave of assaults. Jesus will most certainly come out victorious because He is not only man but also God. He prepares because it's what you need to do but so often do not. He practices saying "no" to what is easy and what the flesh immediately wants.

Jesus fasts and prays, not for His benefit, but for you - to succeed where you fail and to show you the way. He fast and prays because He takes the battle with Satan deadly seriously, which we so rarely do. He fasts and prays because, as He tells His disciples, there are some demons who can only be driven out by fasting and prayer. But we know better, don't we? We know that demons are just boogie men. We dismiss demon possession as just some antiquated misconception about things that we have now explained by science and reason. They aren't REALLY all around us, harassing us and tempting us seeking our eternal destruction.

But our Lord isn't out in the wilderness facing down boogie men or His own fears. He is facing the prince of demons who loathes God and who loathes you. He fasts and prays because He knows how weak selfish and impatient your flesh is, refusing as much as possible to suffer pain and need, lusting after earthly comfort and pleasure even knowing the great danger it poses to your soul. He knows that you would much rather indulge your flesh than deny it even for a moment. How many of us can't even wait to give thanks to God before diving into our dinner? How many of us cringe at the idea of sacrificial giving because it would mean real sacrifice and denying ourselves something we want or enjoy? This is why Jesus fasts and prays. Because we fail to. Because we have been blinded and led to believe that we are too strong for such things. We have been trained to think that the physical discipling of the body not only has nothing to do with the Christian faith but is contrary to it.

It is true that fasting and bodily preparation do not make Christians. That work alone belongs to the Word of God. His Word which created all things out of nothing also sustains creation moment by moment. If our Lord were to cease speaking, all of creation would immediately collapse and we would be lost to eternal judgment. It is by the Word of God that any sinner is brought out of death to life. The Gospel of Jesus Christ crucified for sin is the power of God for salvation. We can't be saved unless Jesus speaks - absolving us of our sins, definitively declaring that we are His righteous and beloved sons in His Son. Only by the Word of Jesus does Baptism have the power and authority to give salvation. Only by the Word of Jesus do the earthly elements of bread and wine bear in, with, and under them the true Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

It is equally as true that without faith, these means of grace - the Word, the water, the bread, and the wine - will not save us. Their nature and essence aren't dependent upon our believing but their benefit is. If we will not believe what Jesus speaks about these things, if we would dare to call the Lord a liar and presume to know better than Him what He meant to say and what is and isn't possible, then they will not help us. In fact, they will stand in judgment against us. Hence the reason why those who deny Baptismal regeneration and the true presence of Christ in Holy Communion are to be avoided as false teachers. We must actually believe in our hearts what Jesus speaks. We must believe and not doubt what our Savior says. Not what we imagine that He says or what we wish He would say, but what He has actually spoken and continues to speak in Holy Scripture. And this certainly is not an outward, physical reality. Faith is secret matter of the heart which no one but God is able to see.

But in our day, we have become so spiritual, so focused upon faith, even somewhat Gnostic in practice, that we almost despise that which is physical. We often conduct ourselves as though we were spirits and not flesh and blood creatures. We may not say it, but we act as though we are above the very earthly, physical ways in which God has chosen to work among us. It is this thinking that lies behind the spiritual but not religious crowd, the “I can be a Christian without going to church” crowd. We cannot despise the gifts which Christ gives and still lay claim to their benefits. The true God, who is Spirit, isn’t nearly as spiritual as we claim to be. He is a God who works within creation. He uses very physical things to interact with us - water, pastors, the written Word, bread and wine, a baby conceived and born, a man who bleeds and dies. And, in truth, He only wants to interact with His people through these very physical means because we are physical creatures. The physical and spiritual are not enemies nor are they mutually exclusive.

What’s more, Jesus didn’t just redeem us as spirits. That’s not how He made us. We have body and soul. The two together make a person. Not one or the other. A whole person includes both. Jesus didn’t just die in His spirit. His body died. He didn’t rise as a spirit. Jesus’ body rose. That’s why Jesus has Thomas put his fingers in the holes in His Body. They weren’t seeing a ghost or just a mental projection. It was the same flesh and blood Jesus with whom they had spent the last three years. By suffering death in His Body, Jesus once and for all crushed Satan’s head under our feet. A cosmic spiritual battle fought in the midst of the physical so that the physical and spiritual might both be restored to God.

And it is this very physical body as well as your soul that Satan attacks with every fiery dart in his quiver in order to drag both into eternal destruction. He attacks your health. He attacks your bellies. He attacks the work of your hands. He attacks your spouse and your children. He attacks your mind and your conscience. He stirs up and inflames sinful desires that those desires might be acted upon. He knows all the pressure points. He knows how to take advantage of your fears, your frustrations, your exhaustion, your good intentions, your relationships. There is nothing off limits. Satan will use anything and everything to bring you down. And every day he is working - sometimes openly, most of the time covertly. And on top of the dangers that we face ourselves, our brothers and sisters in the faith are constantly under attack, the Church is under attack, our neighbors are under attack. They need our preparedness as much as we do ourselves. We are in the midst of fierce war. Jesus even warns us that as the days grow darker, as the end of days draws ever closer, the attacks upon God’s children will continue to

grow rather than lessen, and it will become harder and harder to believe, harder to fight, harder to stay on the battlefield.

That is why God urges His people to discipline their bodies, to force them into submission, to make them servants of God, not simply servants of their own passions and desires. Fasting, prayer, tithing, bowing your head and closing your eyes, making the sign of the cross, kneeling - all of these are meant to make your physical body confess the same as your spirit. They don't make you Christian, but they are meant to serve and strengthen faith by bringing not only your soul but your body into submission to God's Word. They help us to focus our attention on the things that actually do matter. Just as running and lifting weights and trying to avoid unhealthy foods are painful, inconvenient activities, we engage in them, albeit imperfectly, because we recognize the benefits and the dangers of simply giving our bodies over to gluttony and laziness.

It is imperative that we take seriously the enemies that are arrayed against us. The Christian Church on earth is rightly referred to as the Church Militant because it is at war. One day there will be rest. One day our bodies will not need to be disciplined because they will be cleansed from all sinful desires and the devil and his legions will be eternally banished from us. But that is not today. Today, we must fight. Today, we remain on the battlefield. Today, we must take up the whole armor of God that He has prepared for us so that we may fight. Today, we need to fast and pray and deny our flesh its selfish desires.

But our fight, though fierce, is not in vain. The victory has already been won for us. Christ faced down Satan as our brother and remained perfectly faithful, denying every temptation and clinging only to the Word and promises which God has spoken, the very same Word and promises which are yours through your Baptism. You are God's beloved Son. He will never leave you or forsake you. When you fail to discipline your flesh and deny it what it wants, when you fall in hour of temptation, do not despair. Rather, take up the discipline of Confession and seek from God that which He most loves to speak - "Your sins are forgiven." Break your fast and come to the table of your Father that He would restore you and raise you again from death to life. His promises are perfect and eternal and His desire is for you to be comforted by them.

In the Name of +Jesus.

