

Invocavit

1 March, Anno Domini 2020

St. Matthew 4:1-11

Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

As I studied particularly the readings from Genesis and St. Matthew this past week, it struck me how little consideration we might actually give to what was going on in real time during those events. Perhaps out of familiarity or because of distraction, we often let these accounts wash over us and we might then miss out on the rich comfort and blessing that they are given to be.

Consider first, the temptation of our Lord. We hear the account every First Sunday in Lent. Jesus goes into the wilderness. He fasts. He's tempted. He overcomes. But if we have ears to hear, our Lord's temptation and resistance of Satan is filled to overflowing with comfort and divine help if we will only take the time to hear it and ponder it and digest it.

Remember where Jesus was before. He was being publicly revealed as the beloved Son of God. And as we have said before, your own baptism bestows upon you nothing less because it is the same baptism. And like Jesus' baptism, the day of your baptism was an immensely glorious day - a day filled with joy and celebration in heaven and on earth. But as you were not immediately raptured into heaven, neither was Jesus. Instead, Baptism sets us on the other side of a vicious conflict. Where once we belonged to Satan, now we belong to Christ against Satan. Thus, for Jesus, the very next thing that had to be done was filled with anything but rejoicing. The very same Spirit that descended in the form of a peaceful dove, immediately, as St. Mark puts it, drove Jesus out into the dry, lonely, barren wilderness beyond the Jordan. Not much of a party. Where there is Baptism, the cross is not far behind.

You and I can only begin to imagine the true depth of our Lord's suffering and agony there in the wilderness. If you've ever tried to fast for even a few days, you know that the first couple of missed meals aren't so bad. But as the hours drag on, the pain begins to grow throughout your body. You begin to grow weak after the first day, day and a half. Your mood begins to change. Your hunger starts to become the only thing you can think about. Now, try to extrapolate that out forty days. Jesus didn't know that he would be able to eat again after forty days. All He knew is that He was to fast - four, forty, four hundred days? That wasn't revealed

to Him. Imagine the headaches and nausea, the chill of your body as it ached for nourishment. But there was nothing. Nothing but the Word of the Father “You are my beloved Son.”

Does that change your perception at all about what is going on in our Lord’s temptation? Jesus was in the throws of excruciating pain. He would have been little more than skin and bones, parched. He truly was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. I imagine that it would have been very difficult to even look at Him. But why? What good did it do? It gave you a Savior who could sympathize with your weaknesses because He has endured them to an even greater degree than you have. Not so that He can say to you “Get over it. You have no idea what real suffering is” but so that when you are in the midst of your own very real, very painful fiery trials and you can’t see the end, you can say “My Lord knows exactly how I am suffering. He knows because He has suffered it too. He made my suffering His suffering.”

Jesus knows firsthand the terrible suffering that sin has brought into the world. He knows the dark agony of loneliness. He knows the pain of not knowing when His next meal will be or if there will be one. He knows exactly what it is to not have a home. He has had to drink the bitter cup of being hated and rejected by those who ought to have loved Him the most dearly. He has experienced the deepest physical, psychological, and spiritual pain with such intensity that He sweat blood. You can be certain that your Lord was crying out to God for help and mercy. And even there in the garden, though the suffering wasn’t taken away, the promise that sustained Jesus was the same “You are my beloved Son.”

And, as if that wasn’t enough, as if it couldn’t get any worse, after Jesus had grown so terribly weak and frail, the ancient serpent came hoping to finish what he had begun with Adam and Eve. Satan pressed Jesus where he knew it would hurt the worst, just like he does to you. He offered a way out of the suffering. He offered to ease the pain. He paints God as cruel, as someone who unnecessarily inflicts pain and himself as the one who would make you comfortable and happy, who would never make you deny the desires of your flesh. “My goodness, Jesus, you are in terrible shape. You are the Son of God, right? That’s what God just said back there at the Jordan. Look. Here are some stones. Just say the word and they can instantly be fresh, warm bread to fill your belly and end this suffering. Did God really say that He would let no harm befall you by sending His angels to protect you? Looking at you, I’m not so sure about that. Maybe you should make God prove that He’s no liar. And you certainly don’t have to endure death in order to

have power. I'll give it to you right here and now, over all the kingdoms of the world. No cross. No whips or nails. No death. Just trust me instead."

It was certainly real temptation, just like your own. Satan is always more than happy to allow you to indulge yourself, to avoid having to fight with your flesh and deny it what it wants. All so that you will forget the other important thing that underlies the account of Jesus' temptation - the fact that though He suffered terribly, God did in fact keep Him. The human body cannot endure true fasting for forty days. It will shut down and die. Then again, the same is true even when it is surrounded by an abundance of food and comfort. Jesus was sustained during those forty awful days the very same way you are today - by every Word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. He never doubted His Father's promises even though they were shrouded by suffering. God gives daily, physical bread and all the things that go with it, but He doesn't need any of those to keep your body alive. You haven't been commanded to fast for forty days, but if your heavenly Father had given you the command, you could be 100% certain that He would sustain you, even if your body died. And none of those things keeps your soul alive.

Why, then, do you doubt even now that He will care for you? Why are you filled with so much anxiety and worry about completely insignificant things like money, food, health, stuff, happiness? What are these things? Nothing. They are absolutely nothing. They are not gods. They don't care for you or about you. They don't keep you alive. They are gifts from God but nothing more. So what if you don't have them? Your life - physical and spiritual - is in the Word of God. You have life whether you are rich or poor, hungry or full, sick or healthy.

And that brings us to consider briefly the moments after the fall in the garden. Imagine the depths of fear and terror that were consuming Adam and Eve. Their eyes had been opened to be sure and now they were filled with guilt and shame in a way I'm not sure we can fully comprehend. They couldn't scramble fast enough to try to cover themselves. But nothing could have prepared them for the moment they first heard the sound of God walking in the garden. In that moment, they knew hell. The sound of His approaching was the sound of their impending eternal destruction. They had no excuse, no way out. They couldn't run. They couldn't hide. They couldn't cover up anything. And in their new-found foolishness, they compounded the problem by trying to blame each other and even blame God Himself. Then God it was God's turn to talk. It must have been like a freight train barreling down on them. What would He say? Surely He would condemn them as they deserved. Surely that was the end. What began with bliss would surely end

in damnation. I can't imagine the sheer terror of that moment as they waited for the Judge to speak.

But, wait! What did God just say? He cursed Satan and then spoke something completely unexpected, something Adam and Eve would never have even begun to imagine. God said "I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and her offspring. He will crush your head and you will crush His heel." "Did we hear that right? God just promised redemption!" God didn't condemn them as they deserved. He didn't take away everything that was good. Instead, He promised to deliver them and all men from our demonic tormentor. How Adam and Eve's hearts must have soared straight up from the depths of hell to the highest heights of heaven in that moment! There was forgiveness. God didn't deal with them according their sins. Instead, God promised a Savior!

There were, there are, consequences to be sure. Eve's greatest joy and highest honor, bearing children, would now be fraught with pain. But even that wasn't taken away completely. There would just be a constant reminder of her need for God's grace, her need to cling to that promise of salvation. And it was even through childbearing that that salvation would come. This remains true for all of Eve's daughters. You must bear the terrible pain and risk that now come with holy vocation of childbearing, but those things ought to be constant reminders of God's great mercy. They ought to remind us that God kept His Word and sent His own beloved Son, Jesus, born of Mary, to suffer the death and condemnation that should fall to us. This is why Jesus went out into the wilderness - to overcome where we could not. To trample Satan under His feet as our Savior.

Likewise, the relationship between husband and wife would be jaded by struggle and jealousy. The divine order wasn't changed but that order would now be a source of conflict. But marriage wasn't taken away! We are still blessed to be able to have this tremendous gift and participate in the joys that still remain. Adam too, had the joy and pleasure taken out of his God-given vocation of providing for his family and exercising dominion over creation. The ground and all of creation would now only yield its strength unwillingly. Only through great pain and difficult labor would Adam enjoy the fruits of creation. He might even die. But he and his family could still enjoy those fruits. He would have to suffer watching his dear wife suffer the pains and travails of childbirth, but he was still allowed to have a wife and children to hold and love and care for. All these things, all our crosses and trials, serve as constant reminders that we live by gracious Word of God.

Now, however, Adam had the joy of being able to remind his dear wife and children, when the consequences of their sin weighed upon them, when they were forced to remember that these pains and sorrows and hardships were rooted in their sins, that there was still hope! He was able to strengthen them with the glorious Word of God's promise of salvation. "We may suffer now, but God still blesses us. He still provides us our daily bread. He still affords us opportunities for joy, though we don't deserve even a crumb. And more than all that, God has mercifully promised us salvation and eternal life. Let us remember these things. God is faithful. Let us take comfort and hope in the sure Word and promises of God. That Word is our life. That Word daily sustains us and keeps us as we journey on toward eternal life. Our suffering will not be forever. These things we endure now are not to be compared with the joy that yet awaits us!"

Dear baptized children of God, your sufferings and temptations are not lost on your Savior. He knows them and He has tasted them. He suffered and was tempted in every way as you are. He tasted real pain and real sorrow because you do. And He willingly subjected Himself to them so that He might be a faithful and sympathetic High Priest who stands before the throne of God interceding on your behalf. He endured these things so that He would be like you in every way, and that so that when He offered His life on the cross it would be a sufficient sacrifice to save you, to crush Satan's head and free you from everlasting death. This was the cost that He was more than willing to pay so that in the midst of your guilt and shame and sorrow and heartache, you would have the same reason to hope as Adam and Eve as you hear those Blood-bought words "I forgive you all your sins, in the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit." This is the Word that sustains you. This is the Word that gives life and hope, peace and comfort. Because in the Word of forgiveness lies our full restoration to God and the certainty that our crosses cannot overcome us because the old evil foe has been crushed under the pierced feet of our Lord.

In the Name of +Jesus.