

Invocavit

26 February, Anno Domini 2023

St. Matthew 4:1-11

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Beloved of God,

I don't need to tell you that war is all around you. You see the evidence of it everywhere. It is an old war. It has been raging since those first bright days of creation when the world God had just finished creating was still pristine and pure. Adam and Eve were in a paradise that we can't even begin to imagine. There was nothing that they needed or even wanted that was lacking. It wasn't until the serpent suggested the possibility that they had been short-changed by God that Adam and Eve doubted. "Did God really say?" That was the first shot fired in the longest war the world has ever known, a war that has raged for millennia and one that won't end until the heavenly trumpet blasts on the Last Day and the Lord returns to finally cast Satan and the unbelievers into the eternal darkness of hell.

The objectives of this war are clear - Satan desires to claim as many of us, of you, as many of our children as possible and through unbelief, despair, and other great shame and vice, drag us into the eternal destruction of fire, in that place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, and not a single drop of God's mercy will be felt. The tactics are varied but knowable and endlessly repeated. Satan may be crafty but he is completely unoriginal. He doesn't have to be creative because our flesh is happy to lay down arms and join the enemy to its own eternal destruction for any number of cheap pleasures. If Adam and Eve fell in paradise, how successful do you think you are going to be on your own, so far removed from that perfection, surrounded by enemies, tired, alone, distracted?

This battle, with eternal life and death at stake, is a battle fought with words. Consequently, we don't take the battle all that seriously. We become bored with it. "Who cares if a man to be referred as 'she'? Is it really such a big deal for women to publicly preach and teach in the Church? What does it really matter whether we practice closed or close communion?" And nothing makes Satan happier. The less you're engaged the easier his job is. You can be sure that Satan is ever on the attack drawing us away from the Word of God which first created all things and which continues every second to sustain and uphold all things. He lures us with

seductions and false promises. He offers tasty treats that God has forbidden so that God looks like He's just holding out on us.

See how the demon master meets the Son of God. He begins by simply offering Jesus what I'm sure Jesus' body was screaming for - food. After all doesn't God promise to give us our daily bread? "Jesus, surely your heavenly Father doesn't want you to go without?" The whole battle is over the truth of what God the Lord has spoken. "If you are who the voice from heaven just said you are in the Jordan, feed yourself. If you are God's beloved Son and if He actually is pleased with you, make Him prove it. I can give you more - power and kingdoms. All you have to do is make me your God."

This is exactly how the devil will always come at you. He will come with smooth and flattering words carefully chosen and arranged so that you will begin to question what God the Father has said in the Holy Scripture - about Himself, about you, about salvation, about anything which God has spoken. And how much easier for Satan if you don't actually know what God said! If you aren't in daily contact with the Word through devotions, sermons, and Bible Classes, you won't know when Satan is deceiving you.

How carefully do you prepare yourself, daily, to do battle with Satan? Do you throw your children to the wolves lurking in the the TV, on the internet, in our schools and expect them to survive without having armed them with prayer and daily instruction in God's Word? Is it really any wonder that so many, something around 80% of those confirmed, leave the church and never come back?

You are all fighting battles. Many of them are bitter and hard. For this very reason, each and every one of us needs to set aside the time every day to be fed and strengthened by the Word of God, to call upon the Lord for help and aid and strength to stand again when we have fallen. The answer is never more you. The answer is the Lord and His Word. He is your strength and your shield; an ever present help in trouble. There isn't a single one of us who doesn't need, yes, NEED to be here every week, receiving from God's hands the gifts that He alone gives, being armed and having our weapons sharpened again and again. We need to be encouraged alongside our fellow combatants. And, you don't just come here for you. I need your encouragement and support. You all need one another's encouragement and support. When you don't come your are robbing yourself and your brothers and sisters who are struggling and hurting and needing help. It isn't in vain that Christ COMMANDED us observe the Sabbath Day and to partake of

the Holy Communion that we might be bound to Him and He to us and we to one another. We cannot do without it.

There shouldn't be a single one of us who, outside of absolute necessity, doesn't return to these seats for Bible Class in order to sharpen our swords, to train under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit, to deepen our understanding of God's Word so that we can recognize all of Satan's deceptions and speak the truth for our benefit and the benefit of our neighbor, particularly those under our own roof. Beloved, God offers all the necessary armament! He gives it to us freely. As often as we have need of it (which is constantly), our Lord stands ready to give it to us. Let us not be stubborn and refuse any of what He gives. None of it is unnecessary or redundant. Let us not arrogantly pretend as though we no longer need it. The battle isn't going to get any easier. It is going to get harder and harder before the end. Jesus warned us in order that we would prepare...continually.

Here, dear Christian, is the glorious good news! Your great enemy has been defeated already. Jesus succeeded where Adam and you and I have failed time and again. Where we have allowed Satan to steal God's Word from our ears by filling our gluttonous bellies with bread, Christ stood firm and believed His Father's promise that when it was time for bread, His Father would most certainly give it to him. Where we have demanded like unruly, petulant, bratty children that God prove Himself to us by blessing us in our sin, Jesus would not call His good Father a liar. Instead, Jesus was more than satisfied with God's Word of promise and didn't need proof. Where we have left the altar of God to go groveling at Satan's ugly feet of fun, wealth, success, entertainment, and ease, Jesus stood even taller, refusing to abandon the road of suffering and the cross. And He didn't do it because he was going to gain power or authority over earthly kingdoms. He remained faithful and shoved Satan's lying tongue back down his throat because He wanted to gain you. He wanted to rescue you from your own sin and from eternal death. There in the wilderness, the valiant One, emaciated and weak, whom God Himself elected, stepped up to do battle and crushed His enemy and your enemy with the only weapon powerful enough to cut down Satan and His legions in one fell swoop - the Word of God. This Word alone drove Satan back and there was nothing he could do about it - not your wisdom, your piety, your righteousness, your hard work, or your popularity - the Word of God.

Satan is a defeated foe. The victor's has been won. On Good Friday, the Lamb of God, was led forth again onto the field for one, last epic battle royale. He wore no

armor. He had no spear. His hands were empty save for the nails that were driven through them. His flesh was shredded and tattered. His thorny helmet pierced through His brow. He was led out, not with shouts of encouragement and victory, but surrounded by the insults and blasphemies of the very people for whom He was fighting. And in the greatest show of strength and love, our champion prayed for our forgiveness, bowed His head, and gave up His Spirit. The deed was done. Having succeeded in killing God's Son, Satan had destroyed himself. More than that, Satan had given up the only real weapon he had against you - the guilt of your sin. That had been swallowed in Christ's atoning death. Satan was defeated once and for all. Veiled under great weakness and humility, under your flesh, Jesus Christ, in one mighty blow that appears to all reason as His own final demise, crushed the ancient serpent's head and broke the curse and judgment that stood against us. It is finished.

And the spoils of war are yours - forgiveness, peace with God, a clean conscience, the promised Holy Spirit, the fellowship of the saints. You take this death with you as you bear the white robes of Holy Baptism. You are fed and nourished with the life-giving food of the Body that hung on the cross and the Blood that was poured out for the remission of all your sins. These Holy Sacraments, instituted by Christ Himself, are the Word bearers and before them Satan must always flee. How can Satan challenge your divinely ordained sonship when, in your Baptism, God says "You are my beloved Son"? How can Satan dispute your redemption when Christ, in the words instituting the Holy Supper, says Himself "Take, eat and drink. This is my Body and my Blood. I have offered these as payment for your sin and now I give them to you so that you may be certain that what I have done for all, I have done for you."?

Satan may be powerful. But he is not God. Satan can do no more than God allows him and God will not allow Satan to take you away from himself. Still take Satan seriously. But when you do, take the Word of God even more seriously. You have been given this weapon to wield. It will not ever miss its mark. It will not fail to defend you. It will drive Satan away 100% of the time...that is, 100% you use it.

The battle is fierce and the warfare is long. This life is filled to overflowing with suffering and hardship. Sometimes, perhaps even often, it feels as though you're alone and your efforts to remain faithful are in vain. You may wonder what's the use in trying. But listen! In the distance you can hear the voices of the angels and the martyrs and the whole host of saints singing the songs of victory. They, like you, have borne the battle's strain, but now enjoy the promised eternal rest. With Christ, they pray for the Church Militant, more confident than ever in our victory.

They bid you to press on. In Christ, your labor is not in vain. That day is coming for you. You will one day, forever, lay down your weapons in the assurance that you will never need to pick them up again. All your enemies will lie eternally vanquished at your feet. You will join the glorious heavenly procession of victory and you will sit feasting at the Lord of Sabaoth's banquet, served by the Lord Himself. There you will know nothing but rest and unsurpassable joy, such that this short time of battle will be little more than a faint memory. "He's by our side upon the plain/ With His good gifts and Spirit./ And take they our life,/ Goods, fame, child, and wife,/ Though these all be gone/ Our vict'ry has been won;/ The Kingdom ours remaineth."

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all human understanding keeps your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.