

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

'Facing Temptation'

Mark 1:12-15

In the sixth petition to our Lord's Prayer we say, "and lead us not into temptation." In his explanation to that petition, Martin Luther says, "God indeed tempts no one: but we pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us, so that the devil, the world, and our flesh may not deceive us nor seduce us into misbelief, despair, and other great shame and vice; and though we be assailed by them, that still we may finally overcome and obtain the victory."

All too often, though, we assume that because temptation seems inevitable there's really nothing we can do about it. As Ogden Nash once said, "I can resist anything except temptation. The only way to get rid of it is to give in." On the other hand, some may think that the only way to resist it is by summoning up our innate resolve, our own will power, and our own strength to overcome it.

It's important that we recognize the ineffectiveness and ultimately the failure of both approaches. Giving in is certainly not the best way to handle Satan's temptations because that only leads to sin and we know that the wages of sin is death. And we can't just say, "oh, well, God will forgive me" because that's cheap grace at best. And relying on our own resolve, our own will power, our own strength, leaves much to be desired since we find ourselves often failing anyway.

So what are we to do? How are you and I to face the temptations of life that come our way? Well, the answer this First Sunday in Lent is found in our Gospel lesson for today, specifically in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Jesus, according to his human nature, was tempted just as we are. But he did what no man before or since was able to do – he overcame. And the good news is that he overcame for us. Sometimes the fact that Jesus overcame temptation, and might I say not just the temptation that's mentioned in our text but all the temptations that came his way throughout his life and ministry, is diminished in our minds by the fact that he was and is God and as God he could not be overcome by temptation. But that's not the point. For while it is true that he was and still is God, it's also true that the Bible says that he emptied himself of his divine nature, that is, he put it aside, and took on the form of a servant, that is, a human being, yet without sin. And it was according to his human nature that he overcame. It was his faith and trust in and his obedience to his Father and His Word that saw him through all temptation. And in that he did what Adam could have done but didn't and what we couldn't have done and haven't, he remained faithful to God.

Because of Jesus Christ, we, who belong to him by virtue of our baptism into his name and now have him living within us by faith through the power of the Holy Spirit in and through our baptism, are strengthened to stand up to the temptations of the devil, the world, and even our own sinful flesh. He strengthens us, first of all, as Luther says, by guarding and keeping us in his care. St. Paul said in 2 Thessalonians 3:3, “The Lord is faithful. He shall establish you and keep you from evil.” How often temptation passes by the people of God because God shields them and protects them from evil! But, second of all, he also strengthens us when temptation does come our way. He strengthens us in Word and Sacrament. St. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10:13, “God is faithful. He will make a way to escape so that you may be able to bear it.” In Ephesians, St. Paul says we are strengthened by putting on the whole armor of God for our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. We stand firm only as we put on that armor – the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the Gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit.

He equips us to stand up to temptation – not simply to give in or to rely on our own strength but because we are grounded in Christ and in his presence and in his power and, in him, we too can overcome. But when we fail, and we will because, in the end, we are still sinners, we know that we have the forgiveness that he earned for us through his life, death and resurrection by grace through faith when we repent and turn to him in faith.

In the TV movie entitled, “Eric”, Eric is a young boy dying of cancer. Near the end of the movie he stands on a beach with his dad near their summer home. “Daddy,” he says, “remember how I wanted to swim across the bay with you? And remember how we got halfway across and I said I couldn’t make it? You reached out and held on to me and together we made it across. Well, Daddy, I don’t think I can make it now either.” (He was, of course, referring to his struggle with death.) Eric’s father lovingly puts his arms around his son and says, “I won’t let you go down, son. Put your arms around my neck again, and we’ll go on together.”

Today, Jesus invites us to put our arms around his neck and to go on together. May God bless us all to that end this Lenten season and always for Jesus’ sake. Amen.