

“NOT GIVING UP ON GOD’S AGENDA”

Message for the first Sunday in Lent

From Pastor Norman Staker

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GENESIS 2: 15-17; 3: 1-7 ** ROMANS 5: 12-19 ** MATTHEW 4: 1-11

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS
RISEN INDEED!!

Ask almost anyone who’s had American history, who’s living in the United States, ask them who ‘discovered’ America and without a moment’s hesitation they will probably say Christopher Columbus. It’s a well-known fact, so well known that many of us can lapse into a chorus about the guy who ‘sailed the ocean blue, in 14 hundred and 92.’ Except, there are holes in that story.

First of all, his name was Cristoforo Columbo; he was Italian after all. And it’s rumored he was half-Jewish.

Then there is the considerable problem: how do you ‘discover’ a land that is already inhabited, as we know the Western Hemisphere was. And what do we do with the fact that the Vikings ‘discovered’ and were living in what is now Canada sometime around the year 1000. The Columbus story is so ingrained in people’s minds that tampering with it can be very problematic. Such is the case with this morning’s reading from Genesis.

Few biblical stories, Christmas, Easter, and the Exodus aside, are as familiar as this one. But it has been tampered with so much and layered with theology that we may be reluctant to read it in a new light. But we must do that, for there is much that is and is not in this text.

The tendency at the beginning of this season of Lent is to pick up and run with some idea of original sin lifted from this passage. Saint Augustine tried it centuries ago. But look closely, there is no evidence to original sin, either literally or

metaphorically. There is indeed what we can call sin; a major breakdown in the relationship between human beings and God, and arguably it is original in the sense of not having a precedent in Genesis. But the theology that suggests every person since Adam and Eve is born corrupt and evil because of the so-called apple incident is far-fetched at best and unscriptural at worst.

So why do we have this story? We humans have some big questions about life. Why do we have to work so hard? Why can't we just sit around in paradise and eat whatever we want? Why is childbirth such an incredible ordeal for women, especially at a time when there were no epidural shots or Lamaze classes? Women frequently died bringing new life into the world; surely that didn't make sense. Did God make a mistake? Was/Is God not as loving as we first thought? Or did we somehow botch it up?

The real key to this story is that God is indeed present. Despite blatantly doing the one thing that God told them not to do, God does not kill Adam and Eve or even that wily serpent who seems to have started the whole chain of events. No, God remains with them. Forever. The couple have to leave the garden, sent out of paradise into what we call 'the real world.' Then again it's the only world we know.

And God does not stay back in the wonderful garden that he created and leave them alone; no, he goes with them. Thankfully, He's still with us too,

So we move to our Gospel, again the same we had last year for the first Sunday in Lent. And I want to start off with two assumptions. The first is that the temptations in the wilderness were real temptations and that Jesus really, truly, all the way, heart, mind, and soul, and body suffered those temptations because he is and was fully human. They're not a trick or some illusion. We can't have it both ways; we cannot say Jesus experienced everything we did, except sin and temptation. Either the temptations were real or the whole story is pointless and the incarnation, the birth of Jesus in the flesh, wasn't one. Either Jesus was fully human or he wasn't; and if he wasn't, I have nothing further to say on this subject, ever! And that might please some of you a great deal.

The second assumption is that the opening verse of the Gospel lesson means exactly what it says. I know you heard it a few moments ago but listen again: "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness." Jesus was led by the Spirit, of God; Jesus was not, repeat not, led by the devil. Jesus, the same person that we heard a voice from heaven had just said, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am

well pleased” was promptly led by the Spirit, of God, into the wilderness to be tempted.

Folks, God’s universe is not dualistic. There are not two gods; there is only one. We’ve known that since Sunday school. As our Jewish friends say, and my Yiddish is terrible, so translated, it’s “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one God alone!”

Temptation is probably the most familiar experience of the Christian. While some may be tempted more than others, all will be tempted. Someone once said, ‘Have you ever wondered why opportunity knocks once, yet temptation bangs on the door constantly?’

I believe there is a great deal that we can learn from the temptations of Christ as found in Matthew 4 and also in Luke 4. I am firmly convinced that there are some basic principles and similarities between the temptations of Jesus and our temptations.

Jesus was not tempted so that the Father could learn anything about His Son. Jesus was tempted so that every creature in Heaven and on earth might know that Jesus Christ is the mighty conqueror. Jesus was also tempted so that Satan and his tactics could be exposed.

By studying the temptation of our Lord by Satan, we learn a great deal about our adversary, Satan. To know the methods of our enemy, the Devil, we are forewarned and forearmed as to the temptations by which he will seek to destroy us.

A pastor once told his congregation about a man who had a dog, and the man was trying to train his dog to be obedient. And what he would do was to take a large piece of meat, good, red, juicy meat that dogs would normally like to eat, and he would put it in the middle of the floor near the dog and then he would say, “No,” to the dog. Well, the first few times the “No,” was an irrelevant suggestion, the dog proceeded to grab the meat and got wailed on, and after a few such results when he said, “No,” the dog no longer attacked the meat.

But what the man noticed was this; the dog never looked at the meat anymore. When he put the meat on the floor, the dog never for a moment took his eyes off his master. Seemingly feeling that if he did so the temptation to disobey would be too great, so he just maintained a steadfast gaze into the face of his master.

The greatest way to experience victory is a steadfast gaze into the face of the Master who has been there and shown us the path of victory.

If anything this passage is designed for us to take our eyes off the temptation, focus them on the Master who was victorious in all points though tempted like as we are yet without sin. If we will do this, we will be able to enter into His victory. That's what this passage is going to do for us.

Temptation is common to all of us; victory is not so common. The problem is we look at the object and not the Master. Maybe this morning this will help us change that.

Jesus was tempted after His baptism and after the divine acknowledgment from Heaven as to who He was. It was a significant time in the life of Christ when Satan attacked Him.

“Then” - there is an emphasis laid upon that. Immediately after the heavens were opened to Him, and the Spirit descended on Him, and He was declared to be the Son of God; the next news we hear of him is, He is tempted! Special privileges and special tokens of divine favor, will not prevent us from being tempted.

He was baptized to identify the Savior of sinners with those He came to save. He chose to deliberately identify Himself with Adam's ruined race.

He was baptized not because He was a sinner but because we were, and He had come to take our place.

Again, who was being tempted? It was the man, Jesus who was being tempted.

We must recognize that Jesus did not use His divine powers to overcome the enemy. Jesus used the spiritual resources that are available to us today.

Jesus used the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God to defeat the devil. He was teaching us to trust in the eternal Word of God. Jesus could have used an angelic force to overcome Satan. Jesus could have exercised his deity. A single word from His mouth would have sent the tempter back to his infernal den, but instead He used three words, "IT IS WRITTEN."

With all the choice of weapons which He might have selected to use, and yet He used the Word of God. Let us grasp and hold precious the blessed Book as our only weapon of warfare when dealing with the devil. Cast away human reasoning and human eloquence. Arm yourself with the Word of God. It is safest to meet temptation, not by your own reasonings and thoughts, but by the Word which cannot lie.

Jesus chose to use the Word when He was all alone. The Bible has value in public as well as private use.

Like some of these scam artists who disguise the real truth, and use AI or something like it to confuse and deceive, the devil will use the Word of God when he needs to. However, Satan cleverly omitted words; he cleverly omitted the context. Any text without a context is a pretext.

You leave the WORD of God and go to reasoning, and you are easy game for the Devil. Do not attempt to reason with the Devil; use the eternal Word on him. The devil's first goal in the garden of Eden was to disarm Eve by robbing her of the only weapon she had, the Word of God.

Notice as well, that geography will not protect you from temptation. Jesus was in the wilderness, on the temple pinnacle, and on a high mountain, and in each place, He was still tempted. Jesus was tempted in the holy city at the highest point of the temple.

How does the temptation of the Lord relate to me? Jesus was tempted and was victorious over temptation. As a result the message for us is two fold.

First, there is no need for despair.

Most people find temptation depressing and discouraging. They feel that they must be wicked to be tempted.

Temptation does not indicate sin. Jesus was tempted, and yet He did not sin. God had but one Son without corruption, but He had none without temptation.

Christ was not wicked; He was without sin. The real reason that you are tempted is because you are important. Satan wants to make you sin because you are important. The nearer and dearer any child of God is to the Son of God, the more Satan may trouble you.

Second, the message for the believer is there is no room for defeat.

Jesus had the authority and the power to tell the devil to leave, but instead He employed the written Word of God. As Man He was showing us how we too may be victorious in the hour of temptation.

Jesus showed us how to handle the selected weapon, the Word of God. Always be ready with it

How can you and I defeat that old serpent? It will not be by our own good intentions or resolutions or will power.

In our text, Jesus demonstrated the protective power of the Word of God.

We need to know WHAT is written and WHERE it is written, and WHY it was written and then, thunder its truths in the ear of the serpent, "IT IS WRITTEN!"

The devil didn't leave Jesus forever after the wilderness. When he leaves, he only does temporarily. He will come again. The devil is after you and me, like a wild animal stalking its prey.

The devil may retreat, but he will return. Be ready for him by arming yourself with the Bible. As long as we have life, we will be tempted. Not all in the same way. Not all at the same time. But, all of us will be tempted. Constant, daily vigilance is required. At our weakest moment. When we are proudest of our achievements. When we think more highly of ourselves that we should. When we give in to doubt, worry and despair. Beware. You will be tempted when you least expect it.

As we begin the Lenten season, may you, like Jesus when He was tempted, find strength and grace to stand. May His Word be the rock upon which we stand. Our Heavenly Father will strengthen us. And, if we fall, will also lift us again because He loves us eternally.

Amen.