**Sunday, March 9, 2025**

**First Sunday of Lent
Matthew 4:1-11
“Just Say No”
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe**

In previous encounters with this Gospel reading I had the luxury of picturing temptation rather naively. Six years ago I considered it as the urge to eat or acquire something we didn’t need – a second helping of pie, or a new Apple watch. Three years ago I imagined being tested by the demons discouragement, disappointment and or despair.

Today, both of those approaches seem tame. At this moment we are being tempted to give in to demons of chaos and confusion that are assailing the foundations of what we know to good, true, and right. What can we learn from Jesus’ wilderness experience about standing firm in such dangerous times?

Jesus has just been baptized. The Holy Spirit has descended upon him in bodily form. The Spirit’s first task is to drive him into the wilderness for a 40-day fast where the devil begins to work on him, tempting him in ways that Luke does not explain. When that time was over, the Greek says, Jesus hungered – putting it mildly.

With Jesus in a weakened state, it was an ideal time for the devil to hurl the three biggest temptations at him. On the surface it appears as a contest of cosmic proportions, the divine versus the diabolical. Yet we know, and Jesus knows, it is hardly a battle of equals. If we take a closer look, we can see that the devil’s attempts to gain the upper hand are truly pathetic, meaning full of pathos – pitiful, pitiable. For in fact he is a great disadvantage: Jesus is God’s Son, and he is a fallen angel.

For the first temptation, if the devil was cleverer he would have tempted Jesus not with the promise of a solitary loaf but with bread for the world to feed all hungry people. Wouldn’t that be more likely to appeal to what Jesus knew his mission would be? But all the devil can come up with is a ploy to take the edge of Jesus’ hunger. Jesus’ reply reveals this pathetic test for what it is -- “One does not live by bread alone” -- as he places himself squarely in the midst of the world’s need.

So Satan tries again, trying to get Jesus to jump at the offer of a blanket dictatorship over the world’s systems of power. Apparently he did not know of the authority already given to Jesus before his birth, when the angel Gabriel announced to Mary in Luke 1: “He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Plus he admits the authority was not even his in the first place, as “it has been given over to me” presumably by God (why, we don’t know).

Jesus affirms this higher authority in his succinct response and puts the devil in his place: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”

And finally we have the devil flailing around with a ridiculous attempt to Jesus to show off his power for no reason other than prideful self-display. Jesus will perform miracles and deeds of power, but for the sake of the world, not for himself.

Pitifully, Satan once again shows his ignorance of scripture by completely misinterpreting verses he quotes from Psalm 91 as he tries to twist them to his own advantage. This psalm, as we know well and heard again today, is addressed to those who reside in God’s presence: “You who dwell in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty.” The words of Psalm 91 that Satan quotes to Jesus are anything but an arrogant challenge; rather, they provide reassurance of the protection of God’s angels to those who, in the midst of challenges, find their faith tested:

 ‘He will command his angels concerning you,
  to protect you,’  and ‘On their hands they will bear you up,
  so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’

 Jesus’ reply hands the devil his final defeat on a silver platter while making clear that God is in charge: “Do not put the Lord YOUR God to the test.”

If you are wondering now what all this has to do with us, listen again to the last line of today’s Gospel: “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.”

We are now in such an opportune time. How? Why? Wasn’t Satan defeated in Jesus’ resurrection? Yes, that did seal the final outcome. But Revelation 12 explains what came next: After this great victory was won through the war in heaven fought by Michael and his angels, “that great dragon was thrown down from heaven, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world -- he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.” They are on the loose. And Satan is even more desperate because he knows his time is short.

So when you hear masses of people being instructed that empathy is the fundamental weakness of Western civilization – empathy, the quality that makes us most human in giving us the ability to understand and share in the feelings of others – that is a clear sign of these forces of chaos and confusion at work. In Paul’s words, “Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; their minds are set on earthly things.”

Don’t give in. Just say no. Cling to the faith that is ours on every page of this book. Grab onto words especially from Paul that keep us grounded in Christ: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” Or as we heard today, “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

Draw on Martin Luther, because he better than almost everyone understood the danger of Satan’s temptations: “Though hordes of devils fill the land, all threat’ning to devour us, we tremble not, unmoved we stand – they cannot overpower us. Let this world’s tyrant rage, in fierce war engage; he is doomed to fail. God’s judgment must prevail! One little word subdues him. And what is that word? Christ.

Embrace empathy. Cultivate virtue. Stay grounded in truth. Exercise good discernment. Stand up for justice. Defend the vulnerable. Let love be your strength and your song.

The kingdom of God WILL come, no matter what, but each of us plays a part how that takes shape. When you see assaults of inhumanity being hurled at God’s people, stand your ground like Jesus did. Craft your own succinct, Christ-centered response, and stake your life on it.

The Holy Spirit could have saved Jesus from having to endure this entire episode. Here, you’re baptized, now go on to your first ministry assignment in your hometown of Nazareth. But no – the devil is real. Jesus needed to develop the tools to deal with him, and so do we. Be strong, take heart, and know that even in the midst of our struggle the devil’s fate has already been sealed.