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Mark 1:12-15

CHRIST FOUGHT THE BATTLE WE COULD NOT WIN

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Last Wednesday we entered into another Lenten season. Lutherans have special services for Lent. We focus our attention on Jesus' passion, his suffering and death. It is the very heart of the gospel as we see his love for us. Most Sunday School children would answer the question, "Why is Jesus Christ your Savior?" with something like "He died on the cross to take away my sins." They would be absolutely right, but there would still be something missing.

The Old Testament tells us of sacrifices that had to be made to remind us that sin separated us from God. The worshipers would sacrifice sheep, goats, bulls and other animals. There was one requirement. Those animals had to be perfect, free from any blemish or defect. You couldn't sacrifice a lamb with a broken leg or one that was sickly and going to die anyway. Only a perfect sacrifice would do. If Jesus was the Lamb of God who was going to take away the sin of the world, then he had to be perfect as well. He could have no sin in him. He could not succumb to the temptations that Satan throws against us every day.

Every year in the first Sunday in the Epiphany season, we go to the Jordan River where our Lord Jesus is baptized by John. Why was Jesus baptized? If he was the holy, sinless Son of God, why would he need baptism? Jesus was our Substitute. Even though he had no sin in him, he stood in solidarity with and in place of sinners. This is the very reason he had taken on human flesh. He was going to take on Satan. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. God the Father approved Jesus for this mission. The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove and remained on him.

Jesus was now sent out into the wilderness where he will take on all the temptations of Satan. The first Sunday of Lent reminds us of that battle, a battle that we could not possibly win on our own. Jesus came to be our Substitute. He came to do what we were unable to do and he came to undo what our sins had done. The opening salvo in this war was fired many years ago in the Garden of Eden. Satan planted the seeds of doubt in the minds of our first parents. He led them to believe that they could not trust God's truthfulness and they could not trust God's love for them. Their lives would be better off if they rebelled against him. They listened to the prince of lies and sin and death entered God's perfect world. We see the effects of sin and death each and every day and they certainly aren't pretty.

We say that Jesus was the second Adam. Where the first Adam failed, Jesus would have to succeed. Jesus would have to fend off every temptation of the evil one. St. Mark says so much in just one verse. "At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan." The temptation was ongoing. Every day our Lord was tempted. Perhaps some days it lasted only a little while, other days it went on for hours. You can imagine waiting for it. When is it going to strike? How is Satan going to attack?

Let's get one thing straight. Every temptation is a variation of the first one. Did God really say? Can we really believe God when he tells us something? What is God's angle? What does he really want from us? Does he really want to suck all the joy out of our lives? Does he want to make our lives restrictive? We don't have to take it, do we? Satan is very good at what he does. If he could lead Adam and Eve astray in a perfect world, what chance do we have in resisting him? We needed one greater than us. We needed one stronger than Satan. CHRIST FOUGHT THE BATTLE WE COULD NOT WIN.

This is a one on one battle. Jesus is alone. Being alone can be something very scary. We feel the drama. There are no other human beings around. And there are wild animals. Have you ever been out in the woods alone, at night? You aren't exactly sure of where you are and you hear the howl of a wolf. How close is it? A half mile away? closer? It howls again. It seems closer this time! It's scary. These animals are scavengers and meat eaters. You start to feel very nervous.

I want you to think back on some of those times when you fell into sin. Weren't those times when you were alone? It was just you and Satan. He planted a thought, a suggestion in your mind. You thought it was foolish, crazy, stupid. You thought about it some more. For some odd reason, it sounded better. You kept thinking and it would become an obsession. You had to do it. Nothing was going to stop you from doing it. It sounded like a great idea. And after you did it, you wondered, "What was I thinking?"

You aren't alone. That's the way Satan works. He wants to get you alone, to pick you off as you are isolated from others. I don't think that too many teenagers would be tempted to drink a six pack of beer when the whole family is sitting around in the living room. But if Mom and Dad are gone for the weekend, that's a different matter altogether. I don't think that too many men would be tempted to stop at a pornographic bookstore when they are driving with the whole family in the car. But if one were on a business trip in another city, that's different. We love our spouse. We just want to kill a little time when we are out of town. We stop at the hotel bar for a drink. We see a pretty face at the end of the bar. We flirt a little. She flirts back. It's kind of fun. It's just one night. Who would ever know? What about that person you really don't like so much? Why not tell a rumor and spread it? No one will ever trace it back to you.

Temptations are not easy to resist, are they? We know that and we know it all too well. It isn't that difficult for us to think of many times when Satan got the better of us and led us into sin. We are ashamed of those sins. We don't want anyone close to us to know what we were thinking or saying or doing. We don't want our parents to know. We don't want our spouse to know. We don't want our children to know. We don't want our friends to know. We don't even want strangers to know. We live with these sins and they bother us.

Jesus goes into war with the same Satan who has led us astray too many times. He is out in the wilderness, the very same wilderness where the nation of Israel rebelled against God time and time again. He is both the second Adam and the nation of Israel in one man. For our sakes, He cannot fail. It is even more difficult for Jesus. Adam and Eve were in a lush garden where everything was green and beautiful. Everywhere Adam went in that garden, he could see food, lush and ripe and pleasing to the eye. It could not rot or spoil. The second Adam would not be as fortunate. There would not be a lot of food in the wilderness. Jesus had gone without food for forty days.

We know how we are. Hunger is a very real temptation. I am a diabetic. I know what foods I should be eating and what foods I should not be eating. To be honest, I don't get a lot of cravings for celery sticks and Brussel sprouts. Donuts, pie, pizza and fresh, hot bread, well, that's a different story!

Jesus had been declared to be the beloved Son of God by the Father. He was now sent out into the wilderness. It is that very point that Satan attacks. "So you are the beloved Son of God, are you? You would think that if your Father loved you so much, he would have at least left some food for you to eat. I would imagine that by now you must be getting pretty hungry. I suppose that if you look around enough, you might be able to find some lizard or something to eat. You deserve better than that. Why don't you take matters into your own hands? See that stone over there. Why not show your power and make it into a nice, hot loaf of bread?"

It may sound innocent, but it was anything but innocent. Satan was telling Jesus that he really couldn't trust his Father to provide for him. He would have to take matters into his own hands. Remember the Israelites wandering in the desert. How many times did they rebel over the matter of food? They accused God of bringing them into the desert to die. God provided food. He provided manna, a bread that came from heaven, each and every day. He provided quail

and other things. Yet they would not trust that God would provide for them. That is why they would wander in the desert for forty years.

After Jesus resisted the insidious temptation of Satan, Satan changed tactics. He went to the opposite extreme. If Jesus had so much trust in his Father, then why not show the ultimate trust? Go up to the pinnacle of the temple and throw himself down. The angels would surely catch him. Just think of all the people who would see this miracle and acclaim Jesus as the Son of God! That's what Jesus wanted, wasn't it? This is walking by sight and not by faith. It is a theology of glory where we expect God will shower us with miracles and blessings. The television evangelists love this technique. This would go from having no trust to a false trust.

Finally the third temptation would be the most insidious of all. Satan simply suggested that Jesus skip the journey to Calvary. "Have glory without suffering. Live the life of a king. You deserve it. Why should you suffer and die for people who don't care? Why should you suffer and die for people who are very happy to see you die? Why should you suffer and die for people who lie and cheat and curse and swear and hate and gossip and worship any and every God but you? You deserve honor and glory and riches and power. I can give all of that to you. Just bow down and worship me. It's just you and me. No one will ever know."

Jesus would send Satan away. He would do it by quoting the Scriptures correctly. He had to win this battle because we could not. If Jesus had let his guard down and succumbed to any of Satan's temptations even once, we would have no hope. Thanks be to God! Jesus won the battle. His victory is our victory. We are baptized into Christ. Everything that he did becomes ours. His perfect life is credited to us. His resistance to temptation becomes ours. His sacrificial death becomes ours as well as his resurrection. What belongs to the head belongs to the body, and you are the body of Christ, living members of that man who is also God. Lord Jesus, thank you for the victory! AMEN.