

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. ² After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

⁴ Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ⁶ "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:

*" 'He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"*

⁷ Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ⁹ "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him. (Matthew 4:1-11)

Jesus Faces Our Temptation

What have you learned from the school of hard knocks? What have you had to learn by making mistakes? Do you wish that you could pass those lessons on to your children? That's pretty common for us parents to feel. Unfortunately, sometimes, they have to learn things the same way we did. And it pains us to watch them thinking and acting just like we did and knowing what the outcome is going to be. If you think about it, what we really want is to face that stuff ourselves so that our kids don't have to. We want the bumps and bruises of our lives to take the place of the bumps and bruises in their lives. Hopefully, you realize we can't face life for them, no matter how hard we try. Our kids are going to have to face the realities of life. They will face things that permanently affect who they are, and we don't have the power to change that. But God does. This morning, we see God in Christ doing what we can't do for our kids. We see him facing real difficulties in our place. Today, **Jesus faces our temptation.**

I.

Now, when he does that, his purpose is different than ours would be. Jesus does not face temptation so we don't have to. He isn't trying to learn a lesson for us. Instead, he's earning what we can't earn for ourselves: eternal life. Today, we have before us Jesus' temptation by the devil. This event took place at the very beginning of his ministry, right after his baptism. So it was three full years before he went to the cross. Yet, we're studying this lesson today, on the first Sunday in Lent, as we draw near to our commemoration of his cross. It's here before us today because Lent is all about what it cost Jesus to pull us out of death and hell.

Today, we see that it cost him the temptations we all have to face. Jesus, of course, was the Son of God. He existed forever before he entered the womb of the Virgin Mary and was born in Bethlehem. So, he never should've had to face temptation. But when Jesus entered our world, he truly became one of us, just as he truly remained the Son of God. To save us, he had to face all that we face. He had to face temptation. Now, there are lots of different kinds of temptations. And we shouldn't think that this was the only time Jesus was tempted. For as long as he lived here, he faced real temptation. But at this time, he faced a direct confrontation with the devil that shows us how completely he triumphed over all temptation all through his life on this earth. The Bible teaches that he faced everything that we face and still he was without sin.

Temptation comes from the devil. Satan constantly tries to lead us away from God. Temptation comes from the world around us. We live in a society that does not believe. It invites us to sin every single day. And temptation comes from our own sinful flesh. Our sinful hearts overflow with sinful desires that want to be fulfilled. On this last point, we have to be a little bit careful. Certainly, Jesus lived in the same sinful world that we do and he faced constant temptations from his society. His enemies and even his friends tempted him again and again. They pressured him to do and say and think what they did and said and thought. And they

constantly tempted him to lose his temper and hate them. But Jesus did not face temptation from a sinful heart. His heart was perfect. Yet, it is still true that he faced all the temptations we face because in the end, the devil pulls the strings in this sinful world and even in our sinful hearts. Our sinful nature is his ally, but the devil knows how to rev him up.

The devil did not have that ally in Jesus' heart. Nevertheless, he did attack Jesus as a human being. In fact, in this great confrontation, God emphasized Jesus' humanity: he had Jesus fast for forty days and forty nights. He did not eat anything for more than a month. Why did he do that? In the Bible, fasting reminds us of our weakness before God. There's an old Polish saying that I'm fond of quoting, especially if dinner is taking too long: "When a Pole is hungry, he's angry." I don't think we Poles are alone in that. When you're hungry, you begin to feel just a little cranky, don't you? It's harder not bite off somebody's head, isn't it? And it's hard to work. It's hard to concentrate. You make more mistakes and you get more distracted. That's just if you miss one meal. Imagine how weak you'd feel if you didn't eat anything for a forty days and forty nights. Fasting reminds us how easy it is for these bodies to die. So it reminds us that we are nothing without God. Jesus stood as a weak and frail human being when he faced the devil's great attack.

He stood in our place. All three temptations are things that we face. The first one is perhaps the most difficult to understand. When he was ravenous, the devil tempted Jesus to turn stones into bread. Jesus said, **"It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"** That is what God said to Moses when he explained the miracle of manna. God let his people get hungry out in the wilderness and then he fed them to teach them that he takes care of us. If we're hungry, it's because we need to be hungry right now. And he can supply what we need in an instant. So instead of focusing on our empty bellies, he calls us to trust in him and hear his word. Don't we all struggle with that kind of trust when we feel hungry or weak or deprived or sick or poor? Jesus overcame that temptation.

For the second temptation the devil took Jesus to the highest point of the temple and told him to throw himself down because God promised to take care of him. That's a pretty clever temptation, don't you think? God says he'll take care of us. He promised. So I should be able to do whatever I want and God owes me protection. We often think that way. But Jesus didn't. He replied, **"It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"** We don't get to test God. We don't get to lay out trials and demand that he prove his love to us. We don't get to sin and then say, "Hey, God, how come you're not taking care of me?" Once again, Jesus passed the test.

So the devil came to his third temptation. He offered Jesus everything – the whole world – if Jesus would just bow down and worship him. Now, that might not seem like something that we'd do. But it is. Every time we sin, we are worshipping the devil. We know when we lose our temper that we're not supposed to. We know when we gossip that we should keep our mouths shut. We know when we lie or say something totally egotistical or do something selfish that it really shouldn't be all about us. But we want to do those things. We want the rush that comes from slamming somebody else or the advantage we get out of the lie or the guilty pleasure that comes from patting ourselves on the back. We worship our sin and so we worship the devil who wants us to sin. Every time we sin, we're putting something in the place of God who gives us the commandments. Jesus didn't do that. He reminds us that God calls us to worship him only.

We human beings face all these temptations every day. They defeat us over and over again. We whine. We abuse God's love. We worship our wants and desires. Certainly, we have moments when we do better. But even our best efforts are corrupted by sin. All too often, we don't put forth anything close to our best effort. All too often the sinner inside leaps at the chances the devil gives us and he sins. That's why Jesus faced the devil for us. We cannot be perfect. So Jesus was perfect in our place. And notice what Matthew says: **"Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil."** Who led him? The Holy Spirit! And why? To be tempted by the devil. God the Father sent Jesus out into the desert to fast and do battle with the devil. Does that sound cruel to you? That's what Jesus came here to do because that's what we needed. **Jesus faced our temptation. God the Father sent him to do that.**

II.

This is the greatest of all God's mysteries. The Trinity is a great mystery. One plus one plus one equals one. We'll never grasp that. And the incarnation is a great mystery. The Son of God entered the womb of the Virgin Mary and became man for us, and yet he was always God. The more you think about that, the more you have to admit that God understands what we don't. But those mysteries lead to this one: God substituted Jesus

for us. God applied what Jesus did to us. If you go to a movie this evening, what's it going to cost you? Ten dollars a ticket? If you only have nine, will you get in? No. It costs ten. But if someone else pays, the ticket taker doesn't care as long as the ten dollars comes in.

In a way, what Jesus did is like that – or at least, that comparison lets us wrap our minds around it. But it fails in another way: what Jesus paid wasn't money. He paid with his perfect life and his innocent death. God looks at Jesus defeating the devil, God sees Jesus resisting every temptation and being perfect in his heart and mind and perfect in his words and actions and God says that counts for you and for me. God sees Jesus laying down his life on the cross and suffering everything that you and I deserve for our sin, and he says that payment sets us free. We just cannot make that come out to our way of thinking. If a judge had a murderer on trial and his lawyer said, "Your honor, I've never committed murder. Count my client as innocent because I am," what would the judge answer? If that lawyer said, "Your honor, my client is guilty, but I'm willing to go to jail for him. Take me instead." What would the judge say?

What God did in Christ defies our human sense of justice. How can it be true? The answer is grace. Grace is God's undeserved love. It's the ultimate mystery of our God. God loves us even though we deserve death and hell. God loves us even when we don't love him. Even human being – except for Jesus – was born hating God and loving only himself. God chose to sacrifice himself in the person of God the Son to set us free. God's justice accepts that sacrifice. In that mystery of God our sin is taken away.

Do you know where you see that in this account this morning? In the very last words: **"Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him."** You see, the devil was trying to get Jesus to step out of his role as our substitute. That very first temptation showed that. It would've been easy for Jesus to make stones into bread. But he never once used his power to make his life easier. Every minute that he was here he lived like we have to live. He faced life in a sinful world. So if we don't eat for forty days and nights, we suffer excruciating pain and weakness. To be our substitute, Jesus had to feel all that.

The devil understood that. He would've won if he could've gotten Jesus to sin. But he also would've won if he could've gotten Jesus to stop being our substitute. So twice, he tried to provoke him, **"If you are the Son of God."** Prove it! Give up on your mission! But Jesus did not allow himself to be provoked. Instead, he faced temptation the way that we do. He used the only weapons that we have: the word of God. He relied on the same power that you and I have available to us every single day. And he resisted temptation in our place. When this round was over, God did something that Jesus would never have done for himself: God sent angels to attend him. God showed that Jesus had done all that he intended him to do for us. **Jesus faced our temptation. God the Father was satisfied when he was done.**

God is the judge. The fact that he was satisfied means that you and I are free. We can't face temptation for our children. They have to go through life and all we can do as their parents is teach them and prepare them. But Jesus faced temptation for all of us and for our children. He was perfect in our place. And he died to take away our sin. Now, God's promise is that we are his. He sees us as perfect. And we will live with him forever. Amen.