

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Joining Jesus...Resisting Satan

Mark 1:21-28

1/28/18

Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. (2 Pt 1:2)

Mark 1:21-28

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

“Lead us not into temptation.” That’s what we pray in the Sixth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer. You may have heard a couple months ago that the Pope wants to change that part of the Lord’s Prayer. He thinks it causes too much confusion, leading people to think that God is the one who tempts us. Well, James, in his first chapter, clears that up for us: **“When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone”** (James 1:13).

Martin Luther’s words in the Small Catechism help us to see the proper way to be thinking when praying the Sixth Petition. *“God surely tempts no one to sin, 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 or lead us into false belief, despair, and other great and shameful sins; and though we are tempted by them, we pray that we may overcome and win the victory.”* There we see one of the great blessings of being called to join Jesus. Jesus gives us the strength and ability to resist Satan. Today, Jesus shows us his glory by his triumph over the devil.

There are many accounts of Jesus confronting demon possession in the Gospels. That’s not surprising, is it? Satan knew what Jesus was here to do. He remembered the promise God gave to Adam and Eve that one born of a woman would crush him. As Jesus drew closer and closer to the moment on the cross when Satan was crushed and defeated, the devil pulled out all the stops. He raged with all the fury he could muster, sending his demons out to throw obstacles and to cause pain in Jesus’ way.

In the Gospel today, Jesus went to Capernaum to share the good news of God’s saving love. As soon as Jesus comes with the gospel, the devil is enraged and does all he can to hinder the message. A man came into the synagogue who was possessed by a demon. We are not told how this man was affected by the evil spirit that possessed him. Sometimes demon possession involved physical ailments. Later Jesus encounters a demon possessed man in the region of the Gerasenes who had extraordinary strength as a result of his possession. Paul, in Philippi, met a girl whose demon possession gave her unnatural knowledge. We don’t know how the evil spirit manifested itself with this man, but it must have been terrible.

He cried out, **“What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!”** This demon recognized Jesus for who he was – the one come to remove Satan’s grip on all creation. **“‘Be quiet!’ said Jesus sternly. ‘Come out of him!’ The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.”** This demon had to obey Jesus’ command. His Word alone sent the evil spirit fleeing with a shriek.

In his leaving with a shriek, this demon reminds us that Satan's only power is to hurt and destroy. It's still the same, when tempting you to sin, Satan only wants to hurt and destroy. He tempts you to think sin will make you happy, that it will bring you fulfillment in life, that it will give you what you want – control, wealth, power, or whatever else – but all sin does, all Satan does is hurt and destroy.

But we often underestimate the devil, don't we? In the Prayer of the Day we said, *"Lord God, you know that we are surrounded by many dangers..."* Does it really feel that way to you? When is the last time you really felt like you were in danger? One of the great blessings God has given us as citizens of this country is that we aren't confronted by life-threatening danger that often, if at all. The devil, however, uses this wonderful blessing of God to his own advantage. He uses our general security to get you to let your guard down concerning the real danger you face.

In the great "Armor of God" section of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he reminds us where the real danger comes from. **"Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. 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"** (Ephesians 6:11,12). Threats to your life aren't the greatest threats you face. Satan has much darker designs for you – he wants to take your soul with him to hell.

So why is it that we underestimate the devil so much? Well, think of how he's portrayed – a little red cartoon with pointy ears and a pitchfork. He's portrayed as an annoyance, sitting on your shoulder, whispering in your ear, but also easy enough to flick away.

Remember the movie "The Usual Suspects" from the mid-90s? The main character in that movie said, *"The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist."* That quote actually comes from a French writer of the mid- 1800s named Charles Baudelaire. It's from a story called "The Generous Gambler." In that story a man spends the day with the devil, he is regaled with stories, given the greatest food and drink, entertained with some gambling, then when his guard was thoroughly dropped, the devil won his soul.

Underestimating Satan puts you at greater risk of falling for his temptations. Think of how God describes Satan in 1 Peter, **"Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour"** (1 Peter 5:8). It's good for us to remember the words of the hymn we will sing after the Prayer of the Church and Lord's Prayer: *"I walk in danger all the way; The thought shall never leave me That Satan, who has marked his prey, Is plotting to deceive me"* (CW 431:1).

If only we could see the dangers to our souls that lie all around us. If only we would recognize the spiritual tragedy of the sin we so easily walk right into. If only we would recognize that we do walk in danger all the way. Satan is a powerful enemy. He's much stronger than you, he's been around much longer than you, he knows what buttons to push and he desires only your fall.

So how can you resist the power of one who is so much stronger, more ruthless and cunning than you? You can't. You are easy prey. But let's not overestimate Satan either. As dangerous as it is to underestimate Satan, don't overestimate him either because there is one much bigger, much stronger than him – your Savior, Jesus.

With his almighty Word, Jesus proved his power over darkness, over demons, and over Satan. Jesus' casting out this demon shows how he came to save you – by destroying Satan for you. God tells us why

Jesus came, **“The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work”** (1 John 3:8). We’ve already said what the devil’s work is, what his sole goal regarding you is. His work and his goal is to cause pain, to cause hardship, to bring temptation, and finally to ruin your soul forever in hell.

But Jesus came to destroy the devil’s work and he did just that for you. Jesus destroyed the devil’s work by dying in your place. When Jesus, from the cross, cried out **“It is finished”** (John 19:30), he declared that his payment for sin was finished, and so Satan was finished. He was defeated. Through his death, Jesus has sent *“the powers of evil reeling”*, as the Hymn of the Day said. God kept his promise and Satan has no more ability to bring any accusation against you because your sin has been taken away. Through faith, you have forgiveness. Through faith Satan has no more claim on you.

And now, through faith, Jesus has set up his home in your heart. He comes to you in Word and sacrament with his strength to daily fight the battles against sin and temptation. Because while the devil has been defeated, while heaven has been won, in a last gasp effort to steal you back, Satan will still tempt you. Temptation is sure to come into your life while you are on this side of heaven. But Jesus comes in his Word so you can recognize Satan’s temptations. He comes to you in Word and sacrament to give you his strength to resist those temptations. And he comes to you in Word and sacrament to give you his forgiveness when you fall to temptation. He lifts you back up and assures you of his continued love and forgiveness. That’s why the writer of Hebrews reminds you, in the Second Lesson, **“Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess”** (Hebrews 3:1). Just before that verse, the writer said, **“Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death...Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted”** (Hebrews 2:14,15,18). Fix your thoughts on Jesus, that’s how you resist Satan. Jesus has already defeated Satan and he gives that victory to you through the forgiveness that is yours by faith.

The hymn I talked about earlier, *“I Walk in Danger All the Way,”* not only reminds us of the spiritual danger Satan poses, it also reminds us that Joining Jesus means his strength to Resist Satan. It also reminds us to fix our thoughts on Jesus. *“I walk with Jesus all the way; His guidance never fails me. He takes my ev’ry fear away When Satan’s pow’r assails me, And, by his footsteps led, My path I safely tread. In spite of ills that threaten may, I walk with Jesus all the way.”* Joining Jesus means resisting Satan. Joining Jesus gives you the strength to do so, and most importantly God’s forgiveness when you don’t. So we pray, *“lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”* And we see how Jesus has done just that. He has delivered you and he goes with you to defeat Satan and give you his victory.

Amen

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy -- to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power, and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord ... now and forevermore. (Jude 24-25)

Amen