

First Sunday in Lent • February 14, 2016

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Luke 4:1-13

“Working Word”

It makes sense that he'd be charming, confident, and appealing. It's not as if you're expecting the devil to be a big, red monster with horns, right?

There's a new television series on the air called *Lucifer*. In case you haven't seen or heard about it, the premise of this show sees Lucifer Morningstar, maybe better known as Satan, “the accuser,” abandoning the kingdom of hell and moving to Los Angeles – where he takes up the pastime of helping the L.A. police punish criminals. The series portrays this fallen angel in a way that seems to be fairly in line with his style. The producers of the show seem to have done a great job casting the lead role: he's a smooth operator. When he employs his primary supernatural ability, getting people to give voice to their innermost desires, he sounds like he knows what he's talking about; whatever he's saying makes perfect sense. After all, that's how the devil works.

Nobody can ever rightly say “the devil *made* me do it.” That's not within his power. What the devil *can* do – and has done since the days of Adam and Eve – is ask you questions, inviting you to reconsider how you understand the world and your place in it. “What do you want?” “Isn't that a good thing?” “Did God really say that?” **His objective is to get you to convince yourself of the rightness of your desire, whatever it might be.** And with that as a goal, the devil's work isn't much work at all. He asks us to take a distorted version of the truth as reality. He doesn't need to compel us to wrong, because we think we're doing something right in that moment. The devil sounds like he knows what he's talking about because it's your own voice that you're hearing. You and I sell ourselves. “Why would you want God to be God when you could just act like you're Him?” **The devil's goal is to have you forget your identity: who you are and whose you are.**

If you take a look back to today's Gospel text, you'll see just that as Satan tempts Jesus in the wilderness. With his first temptation, he wants Jesus to question his identity by **rejecting his humanity**. “***If you are*** the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.” “Why shouldn't you eat? You're hungry after all these days without food, what with you becoming a human being, and all. People need to eat.” In the second temptation, he calls Jesus to **reject his divine nature** as the obedient Son by worshipping one who is most definitely not God. Satan promises a flimsy facsimile of authority and glory to the One to whom all authority and glory rightly belong. Finally, the devil would have Jesus **reject his role as the suffering servant**: “Prove yourself to be the Son of God to all the people now, without having to go to the cross and all that unpleasantness which comes with it.” If the devil could just get Jesus to fall short, to put himself first, then he'd win it all and none of us would have any hope of life with God. Out there in the wilderness, he gave it his best, most charming, most appealing attempt.

How has the devil been trying to get you to forget your identity as God's beloved child? What opportunities has he taken to have you convince yourself of the rightness of your own desires? He can come at you in an instant – on the road, in a conversation with a friend, when you're alone. He'd love for you to make the same choice he tried to get Jesus to make, to put yourself first and take “glory” now, the easy out, forgetting God's design for our lives and our relationships. He'd love for you to believe that you are anything other than what you are: a person redeemed by Christ.

In Baptism, God connects you with your **true identity**. Baptized, you are now God's child who has been bought back from your slavery to selfishness. No matter what the world tries to tell you you really are, the truth is that you are ultimately a human being that God has set free from the kingdom of death and the devil and united with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Your identity is founded in the word that God has spoken declaring you as His child through Baptism. In that water, the Holy Spirit connected you with the Son of God and made you Christ's friend, his brother, his sister. You are made to be a part of the victory that Jesus won in the wilderness for each of us, the battle with the devil that looked ahead to his victory on the cross.

**Out in the wilderness, Jesus showed the power of God's word at work.** He remained faithful in his identity as the Messiah, God's Son who was sent into our broken world to do what you and I couldn't: live life perfectly according to God's instruction, not falling for the devil's charming appeal to selfish desires. Jesus, who is the Word Made Flesh, brought the power of the working word to bear against the

devil's half-truths and promises of instant glory. Rather than thinking of himself in the wilderness, he thought of you and me and looked ahead to the cross. There, hanging for the world to see, Jesus took on your identity and my identity as enemies of God in our sin, carrying them into death so that we wouldn't have to. And on Easter morning, Jesus showed the power of the working word again as he left the tomb behind in the resurrection that waits for us through our identity as God's children in Baptism.

**Jesus, who is the embodiment of God's working Word, will not leave you on your own when the devil comes to test you with charm and confident appeal.** He will stand with you, even unto death. This Sunday is marked as St. Valentine's day, remembering a bishop of the Church in Italy during the third century. He was arrested for his proclamation of Jesus as the Savior, as well as promoting the blessing that is Christian marriage. He refused to renounce Christ, and so was sentenced to a three-part execution of beating, stoning, and finally decapitation. I suspect that the devil was right there, trying to get Valentine to question his identity as a Christian when it would mean his death. But Jesus did not abandon Valentine, and he will not abandon you.

God's working word will see you through the trials of this broken world. Don't neglect it! **Especially during the forty days of Lent, take time (as we often pray) to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Scriptures.** Take time with all those in your home and look to learn a passage of the Bible by heart each week this Lent, maybe one used in your daily devotional. Don't do it merely to have words memorized, but rather to let God's working word work in you. As it works, you will live out your identity as God's child in love and service towards the people around you. God's word actively stands against the devil's temptation to selfishness and sin.

God's working word brings life and a restored relationship with God. After today's service, go back and reread today's passages from Psalm 91, and Romans 10. Hear again the power of God's word to deliver His people. Remember the identity that He has given you in Baptism. God has given –and will continue to give – everything you need to journey through the forty days of Lent and beyond. *“Resist the devil, and he will flee from you”* (James 4:7) – no matter how charming he is.

**Amen.**