

Sermon – Luke 4:1:13
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Grace Lutheran Church
1 Lent – Year C
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“Focused and Free”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace this morning in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I've never seen a production of Oscar Wilde's "Lady Windermere's Fan," and I probably never will. I have no idea what the play is about; neither do I know anything about one its characters, Lord Darlington. And you probably don't, either. But you are most likely familiar with Darlington's famous utterance from the first act: "I can resist everything except temptation." How true! And perhaps even more true today as we celebrate Valentine's Day. We are tempted by Hallmark and Hollywood to buy into a happily-ever-after version of love without struggle or sacrifice. We are tempted to believe that if we are not in a romantic relationship that ours lives are somehow lesser. And perhaps, most importantly, we are tempted to believe that a dozen roses and a box of chocolates will somehow make up for the fact that we've been clueless schmucks for the past 364 days but have the opportunity to atone for our sins today. But temptation doesn't just come today; it stalks us everyday, everywhere, calling us away from what we know to be true and right with a different vision of what might be. Yes, like Lord Darlington, we excel at resisting – until temptation comes along.
2. Well, temptation comes along today. But Jesus is not tempted by flowers or heart-bedecked teddy bears. No, Satan has something even more fragrant and pleasing up his sleeves when he encounters the Son of God in the wilderness. Freshly baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus is led by

that same Spirit into the wilderness to be confronted and tested by Satan for 40 days. Satan has some great gifts lined up for Jesus, urging him to turn stones into bread, to receive authority over earth's kingdoms in return for bowing down and worshipping the tempter, to call upon the angels to protect him and show himself to be the Son of God. And honestly, it sounds pretty good. Temptation always does. Why wouldn't Jesus turn stones into bread? Are there not starving multitudes to feed? Why wouldn't Jesus accept lordship over the world? Would he not rule more benevolently than the world's despots? Why wouldn't Jesus demonstrate that the powers of heaven are his to command? Is he not the Son of God? Are the angels not at his beck and call?

3. It is in the very nature of the temptations – of the things offered to Jesus by Satan – that we see that our gospel reading today is not simply some moralizing tale about resisting temptation. This scene, rather, is a prelude of what will unfold throughout the course of Jesus' ministry, culminating in his crucifixion. And to prepare for this battle, Jesus is filled, and Jesus is emptied. Jesus is filled by the Holy Spirit in baptism and emptied of all else through his fast and his focus on God. It is in this way that Jesus is able to deflect the offers of Satan, offers that look good on the surface but would ultimately draw Jesus away from God; temptations that, if given into, would become ways for Jesus to prove who he is rather than accept his identity as the Son of God from the Father who begets him. There is an obvious way in which Jesus' fast weakens him, but more to the point it strengthens him. The foodless fast forces Jesus to rely only on what comes from outside himself, which is neither less nor more than the very presence of the God who loves him, sends him, and fills him. Jesus, emptied and filled, becomes focused on the only one who can help him: God. And focused on God, Jesus is free to resist, for where the Spirit dwells, Satan has no power.

4. And this is where things get hard for us. Resisting chocolate or soda or alcohol for forty days during Lent is one thing. Maintaining a focus on the God who fills us is something else entirely. Often, we need to first realize our emptiness in order to see and rely on the presence of the Spirit at work in our lives. We need to enter the wilderness. Some years ago, before I was married, I spent a week in the Boundary Waters with two of my friends, John and Kirk. It was not our first venture into that largely untouched wilderness, but it was the wettest. We had visions of spending long hours each day paddling our canoes through the pristine rivers and lakes that spill into one another, of sitting up late into the night and watching the stars, undimmed by city lights. Nature had something else up her sleeve that week. It rained. And rained. And rained. We chose to be marooned at our first campsite for several days rather than paddle through the rain, sheltering individually in our tents, emerging only for soggy meals of baked beans and mac-and-cheese, eaten hastily so that we could return as quickly as possible to the shelter of our tents. And it was, frankly, miserable. At first, anyway. And then it became a gift. A gift to spend time by myself, unreachable by cell phone and untethered from my calendar and its relentless reminders that I had somewhere to be and something to do. A gift to realize that the only book I had packed was a Bible, which I read hour after hour by flashlight. A gift to remember that there, in the wilderness, God was with me. And while there is nothing heroic about this tale, while there were no miraculous epiphanies to be found, I left that week a little bit different. I remembered that when I am empty, the love and the power of God rush in. I became a little more focused. And being a little more focused, I became a little more free. Free to accept the working of God in my life, freed from my endless self-demands to do something, to be somebody. Free from the need to imagine there was some better reality out there, when the real reality is that God is alive and well and at work in this world.

5. This if, of course, not something we can do for ourselves. It's not about crafting the perfect spiritual program. It comes from the Spirit doing in us what it did in Christ, as the Spirit orients us in the wilderness, in the emptiness, toward the God who fills us in baptism, the God who is at work in Christ, who alone is the one who can resist the powers of evil and temptation on our behalf so that we might be free to live in God's grace.

6. So as we enter now fully into Lent, we are invited to a time of emptying and filling, a time of focusing and freedom. In Jesus, we see the power of God's Word at work, we see the presence of the Spirit moving, and we are invited to dwell deeply in both Word and Spirit. During Lent, give something a try. Unplug. Empty. Go into the wilderness, bringing only the Word and the Spirit with you. For myself, I plan on unplugging from everything and spending at least twenty minutes alone in prayer. I invite you to join me. Well, not literally, because then I wouldn't be alone. But you know what I mean. Use your Daily Texts or your Bearing Fruit devotionals and sit with God's Word. Commune with God's Spirit. Discover again who you really are, a beloved daughter or son of God possessing everything you need. After all, if you know you have everything you need, what could possibly tempt you?

7. And remember, it's not up to you. For the God who fills you with the Spirit and nourishes you with the Word is the same Jesus who stood toe to toe with Satan out there in the wilderness, trusting in faith the God who sent him into this world for our sake. For he, it turns out, came to claim what Satan offered him, but on God's terms, not the devil's. For Jesus is the One who feeds the world, not with bread from stones but with his body and blood. He is the One who rules the world, not by selling his soul but with mercy and grace. And he is the One who has shown himself to be the Son of God, not by calling upon the angels to protect him lest he dash his foot against a stone but by allowing his whole body to be dashed upon the cross and laid within a stone tomb. Focus on this One, this Jesus, who will not forsake you. Focus on Jesus, and be

free. Resist the temptation to do it yourself or to think you know best. Focus on Jesus, and be free. Amen.

And now may the peace of Christ which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds filled, focused, and free. Amen.