

Sermon – Matthew 4:1-11
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Grace Lutheran Church
1 Lent – Year A
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“No Ifs, Ands, or Buts”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace in the name of God the Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. It was a cold night, winter slowly and fitfully turning to spring. The priest was walking home to the rectory when, seemingly out of nowhere, a man appeared with a gun. But over the pointed gun clenched in his hand, the mugger saw something glinting white in the darkness – the priest’s clerical collar. As the priest fumbled for his wallet, the mugger muttered, “You can keep your money; I didn’t realize you were a priest.” In an attempt to calm his own nerves, the priest lit a cigarette. Then he offered one to his assailant. But the man shook his head and said, somewhat proudly, “No thank you, Father. I’ve given up smoking for Lent!”
2. Okay, so as far as I know, that’s not a true story. But it’s a story with truth. Today is the first Sunday in Lent, and perhaps you’ve given up something for the season as a spiritual discipline. Nothing wrong with that, and much that may be right. But there is temptation here, too, and not simply the temptation of craving chocolate or coffee and whatever for forty days. The temptation isn’t really about Lent, but rather our deeply held belief that if we can simply change one or two or, for the truly troubled among us, three things about ourselves, we’ll be able to make things right in our lives. It’s as if we believe that making a few improvements will cover up the deeper reality of our ongoing sinfulness. We, as humans, are consummate cover-up artists, and we always have been.

3. It all goes back to the Garden, of course, to that loss of innocence, trust, and identity that plagues each and every one of us. Sam Wells, who currently serves as Vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, points out what any parent knows: babies and toddlers love to be naked. Change a baby's diaper, give a toddler a bath, and you'll see it's true. In fact, if you ring our doorbell and we're not expecting you, you may have to wait a few minutes as we make sure none of progeny are in their natural state. It's only as children grow older that they come to appreciate the value of clothing, even if they still don't like to wear hats and mittens; seriously kids, it's March in Chicago – we're not making you wear a coat to punish you. But this isn't really about clothing, just as it wasn't about loincloths and fig leaves for Adam and Eve. Young children live without inhibitions because they have trust; they have not yet lost that innate understanding that they were made to live without boundaries and barriers. And then the "terrible twos" happen, but I digress. As we grow older, as we trust *less* our given place in this world, as we seek *more* to create our own identities, we slowly erode our created goodness, the people we were made to be. Every seemingly free choice we make, every attempt to determine for ourselves and for others what is right or wrong, good or evil, leads us further away from the us God intended us to be. And the more we cover up what's wrong, the more we lose who we truly are. The more barriers and protections we create, the more we wall ourselves off from one another and, more crucially, from the God who created us for relationships, both human and divine.
4. This is the post-edinic wilderness we have crafted for ourselves, we, who have taken it upon ourselves to determine what is right, what is good, what is true. And honestly, you don't need me to tell you what a mess we've made of it all. While there is truth and beauty in the world yet, the reality of sin and evil is no mere theological claim, no abstraction for the seminary classroom. Turn on the news; look out the window: the world is not as it ought to be, and neither are you, and neither am I. We are Adam. We are Eve. We have

willingly given ourselves over to the power of the Tempter, believing his lies, placing our trust in ourselves, only to see the barriers rise and the divisions deepen. The last thing we need, frankly, is another, a better, cover-up job. We need an uncovering; we need the truth revealed, both about ourselves and about God.

5. So it is that Jesus, still dripping with the waters of the Jordan, is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Forty days and forty nights he fasts, emptying himself of all worldly fuel and human pretension. And then the devil comes for him with offers that none of us could refuse, all the more tempting because the devil isn't offering chocolate or booze or three nights in Vegas, but things that seem good, even holy. Turn these stones to bread, Jesus – you know how hungry your people are! Throw yourself off the Temple's pinnacle, Jesus – you know your Father will send angels of protection! Bow down and worship me, Jesus – and I will open this world's eyes to your kingship! Food, protection, the divine reign – are these not good things? It is not in these that the problem arises. No, it is in the temptation for Jesus to fail in the same way that Adam and Eve did, in the same way that you and I do daily. Listen to how the devil comes for Jesus, whispering smoothly, "If you are the Son of God..." *If. If.* It's such a small word, filled with so much trouble.
6. The devil, as they say, is in the details – specifically in the crucial detail of our identity – *If you are the Son of God*. The devil tests Jesus by trying to create a division between the Son of God and his Father, offering Jesus the opportunity to define himself. Jesus is having none of it, instead falling back upon God and the scriptures, trusting that he is exactly who he should be. He has nothing to prove. He is the Son, the beloved, and nothing can take that identity from him unless he gives it away. His security comes from God; his being is defended by God; he knows that power and authority belong to God alone. He resists, doing what we have failed to do. We keep trying to prove

ourselves, define ourselves, create ourselves. Jesus, on our behalf, receives his identity from God. There are no “Ifs” that have power over Jesus; neither are there ands or buts. He trusts God, and that is simply enough.

7. So, as we enter Lent, you will not hear a hollow call to do a little bit better or try a little bit harder. Today, we celebrate that Jesus has gone where we can't go, toe to toe with the devil, and done what we can't do, trusting unfailingly in God. Jesus stands in our place, naked, as it were, between God and the devil, revealing both our sinfulness and the truth about God's sustaining, forgiving power. We see here a foreshadowing of what will unfold in Jesus' living and dying: his own total unconcern with his well being, his own forsaking of protection and power as he makes his way to the cross. We are reminded that it is only in Jesus that we can drop the cover-up game and simply become the people that we were created and, in baptism, re-created to be: daughters and sons of God who have been gifted with abounding grace and righteousness through the one man, Jesus Christ. The gospel is not a cover up; it is not a cheap upholstery job. On Wednesday we heard the stark truth of our mortality, our sinful ashy-ness. Today we hear that although we are ashen in ourselves, we belong now to God, and God is not done with us yet. The gospel is the uncovering of our sin and brokenness so that we might stand before God without our cheap fig leaves any longer. And standing there, we discover the most amazing thing. We're exactly who we are supposed to be, children of God with nothing to prove. Faith alone, trust in Christ, is simply enough. So drop the figs leaves and the divisions. Drop the cover-ups and the need to become someone else. While you're at it, *drop dead* and watch the Lord raise you to newness of life. It's the only way you'll ever be who you were made to be. Thanks be to God that Christ has given you the victory and claimed you for God, no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, today and forever. Amen.