

Sermon – Matthew 4:1-11
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
1 Lent – Year A
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“Away with Satan and Sin”

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

1. The man had already decided upon his Lenten discipline. He would resist temptation by giving up sweets for the season. But he thought that maybe he should get a head start on it and give up his traditional Fat Tuesday paczki. He couldn't come to a decision. Prayer and discernment had not led to clarity. So, he decided to leave it in God's hands. "God," he said, as he got into to the car, "if it is your will that I forgo my paczki this year, let there not be any parking spaces in front of the bakery. But if a spot appears, I will take it as a sign of your blessing that I can have my paczki without regret." So it was with great joy that the man saw a parking spot opening up in front of the bakery as he pulled up. He'd only had to drive around the block nine times! Temptation, friends, is everywhere. Perhaps you were tempted to stay home this morning to watch the end of the men's hockey gold medal game. But we are here, entering together into the season of Lent. This First Sunday always brings out to the same place. We are far from the bakeries and sweet things of this world, hearing instead of Jesus' forty day fast in the wilderness, culminating with the arrival of the tempter.
2. The devil comes to Jesus not with offers of decadent food or despicable vice. The devil offers up what seem on the surface to be things to which Jesus just might want to say yes. Simple bread from stones? Not only is Jesus famished; think how he could feed the hungry multitudes with this trick. Divine

- protection? Never mind this being Jesus' prerogative, is not safety and security something we all long for? And the kingdoms of the world? Well, I think it's safe to say that things might run a little better around here if Jesus were running the show. So, what gives? Well, a few simple answers. First, the world's problem isn't that there isn't enough bread. What we have is a distribution problem, a sinful state in which some hoard while others hunger. Second, throw yourself off the pinnacle of the temple to prove God will catch you? Not only does this sound a bit like asking for a parking space, but Jesus came into the world to become vulnerable, to risk hurt and pain. And third, the kingdoms of this world are already under God's domain; it is our task to govern them well. Plus, any time you start putting Christ's name on the government, things have a tendency to go sideways quick. Christian nationalism, anyone?
3. But there is something more going on here, too. Jesus goes toe-to-toe with the devil to undo the sin we have introduced into the world. While this work will not culminate until Calvary, it is begun in the wilderness. We hear today of the first temptation in the garden, when humanity first gave in to the tempter's voice. The story of the garden is our story. It tells the truth of the lie we each believe – that we know better than God. That we want to be in control of our own lives. And, once so twisted, that we want to control others. The eating of the fruit is not the breaking of an arbitrary rule; it is idolatry of the self. Our disobedience leads to the sundering of our proper relationships – between ourselves and others, ourselves and creation, ourselves and God. Were we to read a bit further in Genesis, we'd see how they all turn on each other, blaming one another for their sin and its result. Too often, Eve has been blamed in order to perpetuate misogyny and patriarchy. In Romans, Paul blames Adam. The simple fact of the matter is that we are each to blame. But Jesus comes not to point the finger; he comes to offer a free gift. Jesus, through his righteous resistance to the tempter, restores us to righteousness. Doing what we could not, we are forgiven. We are now free.

4. Jesus says no to the devil because Jesus will not repeat our mistake. He will not put himself under Satan's authority. Neither will he presume to be his own authority. Jesus puts his faith in God alone, trusting that God's ways are best. By Jesus' victory, in the desert and upon the cross, we discover the beautiful truth that our lives are guided and graced by God. No, we are not the masters of fate and destiny. We were never meant to be. Thank God! Let God be God; we've made a mess of things in our attempts. We are each invited to consider what to do with the free gift of new life in Christ. In *Giving to God*, Mark Allan Powell's book that we are using for our current study, we read that we are called "to find the life that God wants us to have, in confidence that this will be the best life we could possibly have." Powell is not spouting prosperity gospel, the popular nonsense that Jesus died so that you could live in a McMansion and drive a sports car. No, what Powell is after here is the notion that our lives belong to God, and nothing could be better than living into the grace of that truth, living every aspect of our lives through this lens. Which, by the way, has very little to do with acquisitiveness and a great deal to do with generosity in the name of the God who has given everything to us. This life might even begin to look like making good on our vocation so that we don't need what the tempter offers. We can be the ones who feed the hungry. We can be the ones who offer protection to the vulnerable in our midst. We can order our public life so that justice and peace, not division and hate, are the watchwords of the day.

5. We begin Lent not with a long list of things we should do, as if that will make up for the ways we have fallen short. Today, we gather with praise around the One whose life has restored us to life, the One in whose dying and rising we are forgiven and free. Free to be the people God created us to be, bound by sin and shame no more. In the midst of the fast, we feast. We do not live by bread alone but by the Word of God. Today, we are given both – bread that in this sacrament of grace becomes God's Word for you, Jesus Christ himself.

The journey of these forty days shows us the journey to the great Easter that will one day come. The way will not always be easy. There are trials and temptations aplenty. But you belong to God, and in Christ you are free. May the free gift of life be at work in you as a sign of God's goodness and love in this world. Amen.

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