**1st Sunday in Lent – March 5, 2017 – Mighty Fortress Lutheran, Hiram, GA**

**based on Matthew 4:1-11 written by Pastor Paul Horn**

**Paradox: Victory in temptation**

A paradox is a statement that either appears to produce two entirely contradictory (yet possible) outcomes, or provides proof for something that goes against what we instinctively expect. For example: “The more you fail, the more likely you are to succeed.” The statement seems to contradict itself, but has proven true countless times. Thomas Edison tried over 10,000 prototypes before getting the light bulb right. Michael Jordan got cut from his high school basketball team. Success comes from improvement and improvement comes from failure. A paradox.

Our God seems to be a paradox. God forgives all sins and at the same time is perfectly just and must punish all sins. How can he do both? God created the world with perfection and holiness, and yet Satan and his angels rebelled against God, evil exists. How can this be? Jesus is both God and Man. This does not make sense to our human reason. How can Jesus, who is both God and Man, be truly tempted by the devil?

In today’s story we read about the devil tempting Jesus. Temptation, as the Bible defines it, is an attempt to cause someone to sin. A little background will be helpful to understand this story. Jesus had just been baptized by John in the Jordan River. If you recall from a few Sundays ago, we know that Jesus was baptized “to fulfill all righteousness” for us. His baptism was also an inauguration day for Jesus. His Father publically appointed him to be the Savior, anointed him with the power of the Holy Spirit to fulfill all that we lack: a life without sin, and a perfect complete sacrifice for sin.

It was immediately after his baptism that he began this work. **The Holy Spirit led him out into the wilderness** from the Jordan River in order to engage in hand to hand spiritual combat with the devil. Jesus shows his obedience to his Father’s will and willingly follows the divine direction by the Holy Spirit.

The gospel writers, Mark and Luke inform that Jesus was being tempted by the devil for the full 40 days and 40 nights. Matthew’s account of this story occurs near the end of Jesus’ time on the field of battle with Satan and lists only three specific temptations.

We might again scratch our heads and wonder, “Where these temptations even real for Jesus?” The answer is: yes. The writer to the Hebrews tells us, **“We have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin.”** Here is the paradox: Every time we are tempted, if we entertain that temptation, even for a moment, we sin, even if we finally reject the sinful action the temptation suggested to us. But for Jesus, he did not even allow the sinful suggestion of the devil enter his heart. To our sin-conditioned minds it seems impossible to be truly tempted and yet not give the suggested sin any consideration at all. Therefore, Jesus’ temptation must remain something our reason cannot comprehend. By faith, we embrace these truths: Jesus was truly tempted in every way as we are, yet was without sin.

That, my friends, is the purpose of this story. Is not simply a guidebook for us on how to battle temptation, but the most important truth that I pray you take home with you today, is that you see Jesus’ victory over the devil for you to undo what the devil had done in the Garden of Eden. Victory in temptation.

With each of these temptations, the devil reached into his arsenal of weapons, weapons he used in the Garden of Eden with our first parents, Adam and Eve. Notice that the devil used food, **“Did God really say you must not eat from any of the trees in the Garden?”** The strategy was to convince Eve and Adam to doubt God. He uses the same strategy with Jesus, again, using food. Jesus had been fasting during his time in the wilderness, and he was hungry. He was human. The hunger pangs were just as real for him as they are for you right now, thinking about where you’re going to eat lunch after church. The devil uses the same tactic: he attempts to get Jesus to doubt, **“If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”**  “Are you the Son of God? Prove yourself to be who the Father said you were at your baptism. If you’re the Son of God, you can quiet your hunger pangs right now. Besides, you need to do this to survive, it seems as if your Father hasn’t done a good job of providing your daily bread for you this past month.”

How often does Satan dangle the things we don’t have in front of our noses and our eyes? He knows how insatiable our appetites are and how we as human beings are driven to satisfy those appetites: food, drink, house and home, possessions, rest, relaxation, sex, our career, the approval of friends. He shows us what we don’t have, both good things and ungodly things, and asks, “Did God really say you can’t have all of these things or more of these things or nicer things? Did he really say he’d provide your daily bread, because it doesn’t always look like it when I look into bank account, look at your house, your car, your health, the fact that you’re not as popular or successful as your neighbors or some of your family members. He must not love you… at least, not as much as he loves these other people, who have more, who have it better.” How often don’t we entertain his suggestion? Victory in temptation – a paradox for us.

The Holy Spirit takes us by the hand, walks us out into the wilderness so that we can listen to our champion defeat the old evil foe. “**It is written**…” this is how Jesus defeats the devil, with the Word of God. “**Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”**  Victory! Jesus is saying, “Bread isn’t the only thing that keeps a person alive. It is the bread of God, his Word, his promise, which points me to who my Father is: he is my Preserver and Provider. I will wait patiently on him to provide. I will put my confidence in his promise, in spite of my current circumstances.”

Jesus wins victory in temptation for you. Through your baptism, Jesus’ victory is your victory over Satan. Through your baptism, Jesus’ life is your life.

But Satan does not give up so easily. Martin Luther once observed, “If the devil does not succeed in robbing us of our confidence in God, he will go to the other extreme and make us overconfident and much too daring.” This is the tactic he uses next, the same temptation he used in the Garden. He told Eve, “**You will not surely die!**” He told Jesus, “You will not surely die! If you are the Son of God, then you will trust your Father to protect you. Test him in this! He’s promised it in his Word! Prove yourself to be the Son of God. Throw yourself down from the roof of the temple.”

How often does Satan tempt us to be overconfident in our relationship with God’s promises? Obviously we aren’t going to go home and throw ourselves off the roof and expect God to catch us. But are we ever lazy in our work - at home, with school work, our career - and yet expect God to make us successful people? Do we spend money, or try to live beyond our means, and expect God to provide? Do we take advantage of family members, friends, neighbors, or speak to them in ways that are hurtful and expect God to keep those relationships intact anyway? Do we expect God to keep us happy all the time, when he has never promised that we would be happy all the time? Victory in temptation? Indeed, a paradox for us weak sinful human beings.

God the Holy Spirit takes you by the hand to stand on the top of the temple in Jerusalem to listen to your champion fight the old evil foe, “God has promised to send protecting angels to minister to his people. But God also said, ‘**Do not put the Lord your God to the test**.’” Victory! Jesus was saying, “I will not be the presumptive Son. I will put my trust in all of my Father’s promises. I will not ask him to do things he has never promised.” Jesus wins victory in temptation, for you. Through your baptism, Jesus’ victory is your victory over Satan. Through your baptism, Jesus’ life is your life.

Finally, with this last recorded temptation, the devil again uses a tactic he used in the Garden with Eve, “**If you eat from this tree, you will be like God, knowing good and evil**.” There was some element of truth to his claim. Eve and her husband would know the difference between good and evil, but not as gods. They would experience and live the difference between good and evil. But the temptation was obvious, “**You will be like God**,” and that they considered very strongly.

But with Jesus, Satan doesn’t offer him God-like qualities. In this temptation he doesn’t question Jesus’ divinity, “If you are the Son of God…” Instead, he appeals to something that Jesus did not possess but eventually would have again: all of the kingdoms of the world and their splendor, but only after his painful sufferings and death. But Satan wanted to offer Jesus an alternative. “You don’t have to go through all of that pain and suffering and death, and on a cross! How humiliating! ‘**All this I will give you, if you bow down and worship me**.’”

We might think, “How did Satan believe this would appeal to Jesus?” Only when we see him wrestling with his Father in prayer in the garden do we catch a glimpse, “If it is possible, take this cup of suffering from me, but not my will, yours be done.” As a man, Jesus knew the suffering he would endure.

How often doesn’t the devil make this same offer to you and me? He promises us, “If you have this, if you become that, then, you will have everything, and you won’t need God anymore.” In our Sunday morning Bible study we’ve been examining idols we never knew we had. Today we talked about making politics our idol. The devil suggests to us, “If this person is in the White House or these bills and legislation is passed, then you’ll have everything.” Do we put so much trust in our politics to save us? We talked about the idol of sports. Do we put so much emphasis on the success of our professional and college teams, our own recreation teams, or our children’s sports teams, as more important than our God and his word? Do we raise up the god of technology and put all of our hope in medicine and science? Do we gauge our self-worth based on our status on social media? Speaking of technology, we have this great tool called Google, and we literally have the world at our fingertips. If I have all knowledge about anything and anyone at anytime, I really don’t need God then, do I? Satan whispers, “If you have these things, and are this person, what need do you have of God? “You will be like God...” How often don't we contemplate this? Victory in temptation – a paradox for us weak sinful human beings.

The Holy Spirit takes us by the hand again, to that high mountain, so that we might listen to our champion fight the old evil foe, “Away from me, Satan. It is written, ‘**Worship the LORD your God and serve him only.’**” Victory! Jesus is saying, “These kingdoms and all their splendor, is not yours to give. There is only one God. I will not give my glory to another. My glory is to glorify my Father, and if that means bitter suffering and death on a cross, so be it. He will give me the kingdoms and all their glory and splendor after I have won my victory over you!” Jesus wins victory in temptation, for you. Through your baptism, Jesus’ victory is your victory over Satan. Through your baptism, Jesus’ life is your life.

Victory in temptation – a paradox for us, because we weak, frail, helpless human beings so often fall for Satan’s lies, his persuasion, his logic. When tempted, we will run back to the wilderness, to the temple roof, to the mountaintop, and see our victory, won for us. When tempted, we will look to him, and find power and strength in his victory, to flee temptation, to fight temptation. When we become weary in the fight, we look again to our champion: Christ’s victory means that one day we will live in the Garden, restored, where the fruit of the tree will be offered to us once again, not as a temptation, but as a source of healing, happiness, a place where there will be no more struggle with temptation, but perfect peace. You have victory in temptation through Christ. Amen.