

Invocavit, the First Sunday in Lent
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Minneapolis, Minnesota

✧ Jesu juva ✧

DUELING WITH THE DEVIL

Genesis 3:1-24; II Corinthians 6:1-10; Matthew 4:1-11

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Much of today's so-called main-line Christianity treats the reading you have just heard from the first book of Genesis as nothing more than a pious myth. These things really didn't happen, they will tell you, but are stories created by the early Hebrews to help explain their place in the world. These stories answered for them the fundamental questions of who God was, how the world was made, where man stood in the order of things, and of why there is evil in the world.

And while these stories may contain some form of truth, they are not true themselves. They would have you believe that there really was no garden of Eden, no tree of life, no tree of the knowledge of good and evil, no literal forbidden fruit, no Adam, no Eve, and no devil. Rather, they say, these things are the sort of iconic images found so often in ancient myth, not literal entities, but characters and things representing basic ideals and concepts. And so the Garden represents a state of innocence. The trees represent choices toward that which is healthful or harmful. The forbidden fruit represents, well, that which is taboo and to be shunned and avoided. Adam and Eve represent not two literal people who stand at the head of humanities family tree, but human race as a whole. And the devil is not real, but is a figure representing a concept, the concept of temptation or of evil, a scapegoat of sorts for humanities failings. Though there are no doubt different interpretations out there, this is basically what liberal Christianity would have you believe. For them, about the only thing in the story that is real is the existence of a Divine being called god. But this god is not a god who reveals himself through the Scriptures, but god as described by those attempting to understand his (or her!) existence in some way. It is really man's words about what he thinks about god, not God's Word to man.

And at the root of all of this, of course, is a basic rejection of the Scriptures. For them the Word of God is made impotent – a collection of stories, a history of a certain community's thoughts and beliefs, a series of writings that contain universal wisdom within them, but certainly not the certain and true Word of God Himself.

Of course, they get all of this completely wrong. Genesis is no myth. It is history. God really did speak the world into existence over a period of six days, days (as they still are today) by the rotation of the earth in relation to light, that is, by day and night. There really was a Garden of Eden; and the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil were actually in it. Adam and Eve were the first two human beings God had made. They were the whole human race, to be sure, but that race consisted only of them at that time. And the devil is real too. He is not a mere concept or a figment of the ancient imagination. Rather he is an actual creature of God, a creature who really did tempt Eve to doubt God's Word and to rebel against it. And this rebel-

lion of Adam and Eve has led to our sinful condition, a condition inherited from those first parents, passed down from father to child in an unbroken succession of fallenness and corruption. St. Paul writes: "through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men... through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation... by one man's disobedience many were made sinners..." (Romans 5:12, 18, 19).

No the Scriptures are not a collection of myths and pious stories. They do not merely contain truth. They are true, historically and literally. They are not man's words about God, but God's own Words and His self-revelation to us. Moreover, these Words are not like the words found in other books, written by other authors. These Words are powerful. They are life-giving. They are salvific; for they are the means that God has chosen to exercise His power and are filled by and with His Holy Spirit.

But the devil is still very much active. The mere existence of the unfaithfulness rampant in liberal Christianity's approach to the Scripture and the doctrines it teaches is proof of it! For just as Satan attacked Adam and Eve by instilling doubt in God's Word in their minds, so he now attacks all Christians. He is active, as the catechism says, deceiving and seducing people into misbelieve, despair and other great shame and vice. St. Peter writes: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (I Peter 5:8).

But today we saw the devil defeated by One stronger than him. The old serpent went out to deceive and seduce, but could not corrupt the Holy One he met that day in the wilderness. And how did Jesus, our Lord, defeat the devil? He defeated him with the Word of God. Now Eve had the Word of God but did not trust it. The devil, as we see in his encounter with Jesus, knows the Word of God, but twists it. Jesus, however, knows the Scriptures, believes the Scriptures, trusts the Scriptures, and wields the Word faithfully.

On this Word He takes His stand, parrying every attack the devil makes. The devil says: "... command that these stones become bread." If you are who you claim to be, then prove it. Jesus, though famished from extreme and severe fasting, will not use His Divine power to serve the desires of His own flesh, and says: "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" The devil, having taken up to the top of the temple says: "If you are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it written: 'He shall give His angels charge concerning you,' and, 'In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'" And while the words of the Psalmist are true, Jesus will not needlessly put God the Father to the test concerning them. "It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'" Then the devil takes him to a mountain and showing him the kingdoms of the world, the power, the wealth, the glory that might be His and says: "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me." But Jesus, knowing the Word of God and believing it, knows that what is good can come only as a gift to Him from His heavenly Father, and that all else is sin in that it had not been given Him to enjoy, says: "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.'" And with that the devil, defeated, leaves Him. Note how Christ first of all had knowledge of the Scriptures; secondly how He understood them correctly; and third how He was faithful to them and therefore faithful to the Father. It all comes down, in terms of the Law, to the First Commandment. Who is God? Do I fear Him? Do I love Him? Can I trust Him? And Faith, knowing God through God's own revealing of Himself through the Scriptures, says yes to these things. And in the face of such faith in God's Word, the devil cannot stand.

This defeat, was, of course, a prelude to Christ's final defeat of Satan three years later, when Christ is crucified for the sins of the whole world, bears those sins faithfully, dies for them, and in doing so rescues all humanity from sins power and from Satan's grasp. When Jesus says "It is finished" the devil is "finished" too! He suffers his ultimate defeat, and as a result is shut out of the heavenly places. His pride is crushed and he is cast down to the earth, and eventually, at the Day of Judgment, will be cast into Hell. Now he must surely realize at last that he stands powerless before Christ and before God.

And so he turns his attention to you. "Why me?" you might ask. He turns against you because the only way he can strike out at Christ is by attacking you. You are in Christ. By Holy Baptism you have been made part of Christ's body, the Church. And so he hates you and wants to destroy you just as he hates Christ and wanted to destroy Him. Luther talks about this in his exhortation regarding Holy Baptism: "Remember, therefore, that it is no joke to take sides against the devil and not only to drive him away from the little child, but to burden the child with such a mighty and lifelong enemy." And what is true for children who are baptized is true for the adults too. If you are baptized and believe, the devil is your enemy and will do everything in his power to deceive and seduce you away from Christ. He is defeated, to be sure, but like a snake its death throws, he wants to take out as many of you as he can on the way down.

Though defeated, he is not stupid. And so his line of attack is usually not direct. Now this is not to say that the devil never attacks in an open and forthright way. Once in a great while he does this so that the Christian realizes that he or she is under real spiritual attack. And here I am talking about cases of spiritual oppression and sometimes even possession, similar to what we see in Jesus' own day. But the devil much prefers to work in the shadows. He likes to remain unrecognized, or to be hidden under a benevolent guise. I took my son to the Minneapolis Institute of Art this week and we saw a beautiful painting by Titian of the temptation of Christ. And in it the devil is portrayed as a cherubic little boy as he holds the stone before Jesus asking Him to turn it into bread. And my son asked me, Papa why did he paint the devil to look like that? Because the devil always wants to look good, to look harmless, to look innocent. He does not show up with a pitchfork, horns and a tail. He is a deceiver who, St. Paul says: "transforms himself into an angel of light."

And his attacks are usually two-pronged. He tries to both deceive and seduce you. On the one hand he tries to lure away from what God has given you toward something else, something that has not been given you which is, therefore, forbidden. Here one thinks primarily of the sins of the flesh, of the allurements of wealth, of pleasure and of power that is not rightly yours and that is not intended for you. On the college campus it's the temptation to cheating, to popularity, to sex, to illegal partying, etc. Later it will be the same sorts of things but on a bigger and perhaps more destructive scale.

And the second part of the attack is at the level of God's Word, where he will try to make you doubt, reject, or misinterpret the Scriptures in some way; preferably in a way that will excuse your actions, make your rebellion seem like a wise choice, a preferable path, and perhaps even convince you that it is faithful to what a good god would really want for you! This is just what he did with Eve in the Garden and what he attempts to do with Jesus. And he uses these same old tricks on you. And so often they work!

So how can you fight against him? You must fight him in the same manner that our Lord fought him. And I do not mean that you should presume to be able to cast out demons as Christ did. Rather I mean that you must rely on the Word of God as Christ did. The very power that Paul speaks of as being behind his ministry as an apostle, is the power to uphold and sustain you against the devil's attacks on your faith: "...in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings; by purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love, by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left."

There are two parts to this defense. First there is a way of life that admits the devil fewer opportunities to lure and seduce you away from faithfulness to God: a life that is lived patiently, that suffers faithfully, that fasts, that strives for purity according to God's Word. But that first line of defense will only go so far. You see the devil knows our weakness and sins and will exploit them against us. So purity of life can never be your only defense against him. If it is he will eventually tear you to pieces. Nevertheless it should be a part of one's defense to put a limit as much as possible on the devil's tools of seduction.

The second and most important defense is the Word of God. And here is the real power for the Christian. The Word of truth, as Paul calls it, is the power of God. And through it we are given both a sword with which to strike at the enemy, that sword being the Gospel of Christ, and armor against Him, being the righteousness of Christ! Against these things the devil cannot stand.

If you try to stand on your own righteousness and use your own wisdom against the devil, he will make minced meat of you. He laughs at your goodness and is far more wiley and intelligent than you could hope to be in this life, having an angelic intellect and thousands of years of experience to call upon. But Christ's righteousness is unassailable. And this righteousness He has given to you in your baptism. There your robes have been washed in His blood and made pure and white. In Christ he has nothing of which to accuse you, for you have been redeemed and declared righteous, forgiven and made new. And with the Word of God you can put the devil to flight. For he cannot gainsay it in the end, but must submit to the authority of God that is exercised through it. The Scriptures are Spirit-filled, after all, and therefore are the power of God, condemning the unjust but saving the faithful. Moreover, the Scriptures are Christ's own Word, and He fights for us through them. And we know that by Him Satan was and is defeated.

Therefore in Christ we are victorious too! And so long as we remain in Christ, we will not fall to the devil. When we are in Christ he cannot drag us down with him into Hell. For Christ has rescued us from that pit. His victory is ours by Holy Baptism. And that victory is renewed before our eyes and in our ears every time we hear the Gospel and receive absolution for our sins. And we proclaim that victory and enjoy the fruits of it when we celebrate Holy Communion; for at this meal we confess that we are partaking even now of the heavenly feast and are part of the heavenly communion of saints and angels from which the devil has been forevermore cast out. And in all of these things we encounter our Lord Jesus and are blessed by Him. In these He strengthens our faith and renews it so that we may stand firm in His Word and faith unto our end. And though the devil is certainly real and certainly stands against us, we can say by the power of Christ, Away with you Satan! We worship the Lord God and Him alone shall we serve. Thanks be to Christ who gives us this victory! Amen.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧