

Equipped to Defeat the Devil

Luke 4:1-13 (NIV)

¹ Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry. ³ The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." ⁴ Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone.'" ⁵ The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to." ⁷ If you worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸ Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'" ⁹ The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here. ¹⁰ For it is written: "'He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; ¹¹ they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" ¹² Jesus answered, "It is said: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" ¹³ When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

If Valentine's Day would have been two weeks ago, I had the right sermon for that day. The bulletin cover showed Jesus giving someone a big hug with a smiling face. The sermon was the picture of Jesus holding his arms out all day long, even to disobedient and obstinate people, a picture of unconditional love. Today, I want you to picture Jesus differently. It's not about warm fuzzies, pink and red hearts, or roses. Picture Jesus as he is in Luke chapter 4: a warrior going out to battle.

Throughout the church season of Epiphany God revealed to us over and over again that Jesus is both true Man and true God at one and the same time and that he is the Savior of the entire world. He is here to win a war against Satan, a war for the souls of all humans of all time. He has grown up learned the Word of God, being obedient to his father and mother. He was baptized to fulfill all righteousness. Now he is marching into battle. "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness." (verse 1)

We know how this story plays out, and, to a degree, it feels a little detached. It's about to people battling. You aren't there. What stakes do you have in this match? You can't help. It's something that happened in the past. But can you picture yourself fighting the devil the way Jesus did?

Jesus has spent forty days being tempted by the devil, and now the devil is making his final push to win this battle. All the devil needs to do is win one battle, and Jesus will have lost the war and the souls of all people. Being tempted by the devil is nothing abnormal for us, but Jesus did it for forty days without eating. That's what makes the first temptation so fitting. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." (verse 3) And really, what harm would that do? Jesus had turned water into wine for a newlywed couple. Later on in his ministry he will multiply five loaves of bread and two fish to feed more than 5,000 people. What's a stone to bread? Who would be harmed if Jesus just did a little miracle to feed himself?

If it were me, I don't think I would have made it past this temptation. There's a reason I don't fast: I like food. I don't know I can make it through one day skipping more than one meal. That stone to bread after forty days of fasting would look so appetizing. But even with forty days of not eating, Jesus still had his wits about him. He saw what the devil was trying to do. This wasn't about offering him a chance to go get something to eat. This was a challenge. "If you are the Son of God..." Prove that you are who you say you are. But there was another temptation as well. If you were the Son of God, God the Father wouldn't leave you out here to starve. Isn't he supposed to be the Provider? Where is he now? He obviously doesn't care. You should just use your power to feed yourself because your Father has left you to die out here in the wilderness, in this desert wasteland.

Jesus clears away the thoughts of not trusting the Father to provide and for using his divine power selfishly on a dare from the devil and instead answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone.'" (verse 4) That quotation, taken from Deuteronomy chapter 8, goes on to say, "but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." (Deuteronomy 8:3) It was a promise that even in dire hunger, you can trust God to provide. Jesus took his sustenance from the Word of God and knocked back the devil's attack.

The devil is reeling, but he thrusts another attack at Jesus. This time he takes Jesus to a high place and shows him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. "I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. If you worship me, it will all be yours." (verses 6-7)

This one seems so simple to us. Obviously, the devil is lying. He doesn't own the kingdoms of the world; God does. You do, Jesus. We could put this temptation down in an instant. But the heart of the temptation was that the devil offering Jesus a way to save the world without having to go through suffering and death. There's an easy way out Jesus. Just bow down and worship me and it can all be yours.

The devil tempts us to give up on God's plan for our lives with similar promises. He points out the hard time we have, the restrictions we live with, all because we live for God. If you just push God out of the picture, think about how much easier life would be. You wouldn't have to wake up early on a Sunday morning. You wouldn't have to feel guilty when you don't come to church. You don't have to waste time praying before enjoying a meal. My way is so much easier. God's way is burdensome.

Jesus knows the hard road ahead of him. He knows that he will suffer and die in the cruelest design ever of capital punishment. He knows that whoever follows him must also take up a cross. They will suffer too. He knows that we will drop that cross when tempted with the easy way out. So Jesus fights for us and answers, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'" (verse 8)

The devil is not done. He attacks again. This time he has Jesus stand on the highest point of the temple. So far Jesus has beat him back with God's Word. Now it was time for a taste of his own medicine. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" (verses 9-11)

Did God really say that? Because if he said that, then I should probably listen to him. If he said that he will protect me, that I wouldn't not strike my foot against a stone, then it has to be true. He has to do that. But the devil is twisting Scripture, asking Jesus to challenge God's promise of protection, to recklessly put himself in harm's way. It sounds legitimate, maybe something like, "God wants me to be happy. Doing this will make me happy. So, it's okay." We fall for the twisting of God's Word to suit our own desires.

Our knowledge of God's Word lacks. We don't know it as well as we should. We get suckered into temptations such as these. Jesus draws deep on the Word of God and pulls up another quote from Deuteronomy, "It is said: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" (verse 12) With that, the battle was over. It was hard fought, but the devil had been denied. He left Jesus "until an opportune time." (verse 13) The war would continue...later.

What do we take away from all this? I know that we were not there, but yet in a way we were. As Jesus fasted for forty days, as he dug deep and attacked the devil with the Sword of the Spirit, with the Word of God, he was thinking of us. When he had that moment when he could have just turned that stone into bread, he pictured your face. He remembered what he was fighting for. He was fighting for you, to win a victory for you. You weren't even born yet, but Jesus thought of you. He knew you and had to win for you. Temptation after temptation, spiritual battle after spiritual battle he did not quit so that he would win the war for your soul and give you his victory.

Not only was Jesus thinking of us as he battled the devil, but God recorded this battle to equip us for fighting the devil and his temptations. The Holy Spirit, who led Jesus out to the wilderness was fighting alongside him. He lashed out and fought off the devil as Jesus quoted from God's Word. He preserved for us that same Word of God so that we also could have him at our side to fight back the devil, to give us an ally who knows how to beat him.

Now, I know the tradition is to give something up for Lent. I even asked you on Ash Wednesday to sacrifice a pet sin for Lent. Today I challenge you to add something for Lent. All three of Jesus' Bible quotes come from the book of Deuteronomy, which is only 34 chapters long. You have plenty of days left in Lent. Use them to read a chapter a day from Deuteronomy. As you do, ask in each chapter how you can use this Word of God to fight back the devil's temptations. Already in the first chapter, you have two ways. One that you would lean on your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ to carry burdens. Ask who in your life can help you fight a temptation, who can be the person that you lean on to give you God's Word in the heat of battle. Another is to remember that God is going before you in this life. You needn't be afraid or worried. He will carry you on through the battles of temptation.

Jesus Christ has gone into battle for us against the devil, and he came out victorious. He gave us his victory and the tools to fight back the devil and his temptations. Arm yourselves for battle. Get into God's Word and use it against the devil. Read Deuteronomy to be equipped to fight him. When you use God's Word against him, the same Holy Spirit that fought alongside Jesus will fight the devil for you. Jesus has equipped us with the Holy Spirit, with his Word, and with his victory. Continue the good fight knowing that Christ has won it for you. Amen.