

Rev. Silas Hasselbrook  
Invocavit  
Mt. 4:1-11

In the name of Jesus; Amen.

In our Baptisms, we become sons of God. Because of Christ's work on our behalf, He makes us stand in His place, so that God truly is our Father. But our baptism does something else. The Gospel reading today happens right after Jesus' baptism. And upon being baptized, declared to be God's Son, and the Spirit descending on Him, that same Spirit leads Him into the wilderness. This is not secluded escape for rest and joy and contemplation. The Spirit leads Jesus into the desert in order that He might be tempted by the devil. After Adam is baptized into existence as God's son, the devil comes for him. Our baptism makes clear to us that there is a devil. And our baptisms make clear to the devil who is a son of God.

We may think that all the temptations to sin and evil are where the people are: casinos, strip clubs, liquor stores, violent areas, litter and pollution. An escape to nature would get us away from any distraction or possibility of the devil leading us away from God. But that is false. To go to the desert is not to flee Satan, but to meet him head on. When you are alone and in the desert there is no one to fight with you against the devil. No disciples. No John the Baptist. No church. Just you and the devil. This is why we believe in the communion of saints and the holy Christian church. We are not meant to go it alone.

But Jesus was. He stands as a solitary figure, bearing our sins, facing up to the temptations of the devil that he hurled against the Israelites of old. Hungry and thirsty? Complain to God and long for the slavery and meat-pots of Egypt. Wondering if God cares or is around? Give Him an ultimatum and see if He responds. Tired of worshipping a God who isn't exciting enough, present enough, listens to your every whim when you want Him to? Construct a golden calf after your liking. God can be replaced, we think, and we know just how He should look.

It is important to notice that Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights before the devil approached Him. We may think that Jesus put Himself at a disadvantage, opened Himself up to the extra tempting suggestions of Satan. But that is the exact opposite reason why we fast. Fasting is not a practice that makes us desperate to satisfy our desires. It is a practice in which the Spirit allows us to control and re-orient them. As I mentioned on Ash Wednesday, fasting strips away all coping mechanisms we might use to deal with spiritual issues. If we are stressed, we eat. If we are anxious, we drink. If we are overworked, we lazy binge. If we are scared for the

world or our country, we hole up inside our homes. If we are lost and uncertain, we seek earthly comfort. If we are angry and bitter, we lash out. That is what our sinful nature wants. We want to gloss over our deeper problems by avoiding them through earthly comforts and distractions. Remember, though, that Adam had every tree of the garden but one, and yet he fell. It is easier to fall into gluttony, addiction, and greediness when we are satisfied. But fasting does away with that. It makes us take a hard look at the spiritual issues and distortions of our heart. It makes us cease from unhealthy coping mechanisms to look at our sinful heart.

And when we see our sinful heart, we flee to Jesus. He is the one who creates in us clean hearts through His body and blood. He is the one who died for all the sins we see within us and without. And we, as those in the Lord Jesus Christ, have the Spirit whereby we might spurn the devil's advances. Fasting enables us to practice saying no to our sinful nature so that when the devil prowls around like a young lion, or slithers his way over to us like an adder, we have some practice with denying the sinful flesh that Satan will try to entice away from God. All this is to say, Jesus gives us a great example of how to resist the devil: through fasting and knowing that "it is written" in the Word of God that Christ has conquered the serpent. The 40 days and nights of fasting did not weaken Jesus in His conflict with Satan. It readied Him for the battle.

But, of course, we are not perfect. When the devil tempts us, part of us always entertains the temptation, considering what it might be like to give in, even if we don't end up doing so. Sometimes we do give in to the temptation. I can think of no better temptation for our day and age than our phones and social media. More often than not, we waste our time on phones, watching videos about things that satisfy our interests, are exposed to inappropriate content and are taken away from time to connect with family, friends, fellow Christians, or be dedicated to prayer and reading Scripture. We need to repent of these both: entertaining the temptation and giving into it. If a person, action, or use of time does not enable you to seek God or care for neighbor in some way, consider that the devil may be approaching you.

But Jesus, He withstands the attacks of the devil, neither giving in or considering what it might be like to give in. Satan tempts Jesus to be his brother. Jesus resist Satan so that He might be yours. What the Gospel is not telling us is that you must overcome the devil or suffer for your sins or else you are a horrible Christian. Neither is it telling you that you can give into sin and temptation and that is ok. Neither is it telling you that you need to have the perfect Scripture passage memorized in order to fight the devil. In other words, you are not expected to be the

perfect rival to the devil now that you are a Christian. Jesus was the not only the rival, but the victor on your behalf. Jesus' temptation is about His work on our behalf, about being the true Adam, about being the only human to spurn Satan's death-dealing work, and ushering in the time when He would be with all who love Him, maintaining their identity as sons in the face of the devil's attacks. What you need to know is that "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him" (1 Jn 5:1). That is your identity. You stand with the valiant one, whom God Himself elected to be our champion. One little word can fell Satan. He is not to be feared. You stand with the One who has crushed the serpent's head, made him eat dust, and reduced him to a witless worm, no better than the small-brained birds Jesus likens Him too. He is a young lion, but measures nothing to the Lion of Judah. He is an adder and a snake, but cannot overcome the one who dies greater than the bronze serpent on the pole, who dies as the sin-laden lamb that overcomes the teeth of the wolf.

Jesus does us a great favor in being tempted by the devil for another reason: he shows us just how unoriginal Satan is. At the beginning, the devil caused doubt in Adam and Eve by misinterpreting Scripture and appealing to their weaknesses. So Adam ceased protecting Eve from the devil and Eve ceased caring for Adam by handing him the fruit. Thousands of years later, the devil does the same thing with Christ. And he continues to do the same thing to the followers of Christ. Note closely each temptation.

In the first temptation, the devil's line of attack is eating, as it was in the garden. He appeals to our base needs. "If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." He questions Jesus' identity as the Son of God. This is what the devil does for you too. He challenges your identity as God's son. He puts the ability into your playing field. You do not need to listen to God, provide for yourself. If you want food, eat whatever you want. Drink as much as you want. If you want sex, do that with whoever you want. If you want money, do whatever it takes. If you want cars, clothes, more property, get after it. Be as busy as you want or as lazy as you want. You are the master of your future. You can construct whatever it is that you think you need. Indeed we see enough ungodly fabrication of identity today: political identity, gender identity, sexual orientation, race. These categories, and more, are weaponized by the devil himself to keep us divided and angry. At the same time he appeals to the self-images we want, he

also appeals to our ability. You are capable, strong, independent, self-made. Pursue whatever it is you think you need. Satisfy your personal wants at the expense of God.

Jesus is no prideful or egotistical fool. He knows He is not the center of the universe. He comes not as master, but as One who serves. He knows where daily bread comes from, as He told us also to pray. We are not simply given food and clothes. Our heavenly Father knows we need these before even we do. We live by the very Word of God that not only promises that God will take care of us and provide for our needs of body and soul. We also live within the Word of God that proceeds from God's mouth, Jesus Christ the Word Incarnate, in whom we live and move and have our being. God gives us all things, including our identity as His son.

The second temptation is an attack on Jesus' piety, on Jesus' faith. The devil tries to throw into doubt not so much Jesus' identity as the Son of God, but God's identity as His Father. He tries to make Jesus question and test the Father's goodness toward Jesus. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down" for the top of God's house. Then the devil quotes Scripture to prove his argument. Here the devil appeals to your worst fears: does God care? Will he save me from my sadness, my sickness and pain, my loneliness and anxieties? Is He even there? Does He think well of me? Will He catch me? Probably, the devil will twist Scripture to make you doubt God. God says He loves me, but why do I suffer? God says He will not let a hair of my head suffer harm, but why does my back, my arthritis, my body hurt so badly? God says that He will work all things out for the good of those who love Him, but I have been waiting for good for years. We may even go so far as to say, "God, if you will get rid of all my financial issues, family issues, work issues, health issues, then I know you care and I will believe in you."

Jesus knows that God loves Him, that God can and does have all things in control and is arranging everything in the best possible way for the blessed consummation of eternal life. He doesn't have to test God to know that God cares. He doesn't have to challenge God to know that God's favor rests on Him. He doesn't have to take the instances of sin and pain in His life as proof that God is absent. In fact, Jesus is proof that God is present precisely within suffering, forgiving your sin, and defending you from the devil. Take heart, He has overcome the world. As surely as He stands in your place, died in your place, rose from your grave, all of God's favor and kindness and love rest on you. The devil, the world, our sinful flesh, and our lack of faith may obscure that at times. But they can never take it away from you, His dearly baptized son, in whom He is well-pleased.

For the third and final temptation, the devil takes Jesus even higher than the Temple mount, to a place where He can survey all the kingdoms of the world, their riches, their glory, their power. He brings Jesus to the top of the tower of Babel. Before, Satan questioned Jesus' ability to turn stones into bread, he questioned God's ability to save Jesus from danger. Now, he affirms his ability to give all the kingdoms of the earth to whoever worships him. Before, Satan questioned Jesus' identity as the Son of God, he questioned the Father's identity as a protector of His own. Now, he affirms his identity as one who desire God's place. Before, Satan asked Jesus twice if He was the Son of God. Now, Satan claims that He is god, able to give the world and meet our felt needs. Here is Lucifer, the light bearer, trying to darken the Light from Light. Here is the prince of the world attempting to launch a full offensive on the Light of the world. Here, the devil appeals to your desire for attention, for worldly sway. If you had more power, you could make the world a better place. If you were the president, you could end all evils. If you had all the resources of the world at your fingertips, you could be recognized for the amazing person you are, the person you family and friends take for granted. Indeed, human history has shown that many great empires thrived at the hand of the devil: the Egyptian and Assyrian and Babylonian empires who enslaved the Jewish people, the Aztecs and the Mayans who slaughtered their own, the communists who made religion illegal. Perhaps America has been flirting with just such a devilish whisper.

But there is only One who can give us what we need. There is One who reminds us that in our ordinary lives and vocations, that is where God is working the most mighty things. There is One who brings us His salvation in small churches, who tells us that now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation. There is One who gives us the forgiveness, peace, and hope we were created for in plain looking water, bread, wine, and words. He is the One who says, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve.'" God alone is the one who gives us life. He alone is worthy of our praise for His great mercy shown to us in Christ and each and every day we live, whether we are hungry and in the desert, or full and in our homes. The acknowledgement of the world means nothing if we lack Jesus' acknowledgement of us. If we confess Him, He also will confess us to His Father in heaven. And that is far more esteemed and prestigious than any recognition we can receive in this world.

So you know the devil's plan of attack. He will cause you to doubt God, will try to take God off His throne and put something else there. He will make you think God will not take care of your basic needs. He will attack your faith in God. And He will tempt you to think he can offer to you the world and all you need. None of this is true. Jesus withstands the temptation to tell you otherwise. His blood is the guarantee that you are taken care of, protected, and given the treasures of heaven. Jesus resisted the devil's invitation to eat at his table and turn stones into bread. The kind of fruit that the devil offers is a food unto death, a distorting and deforming food. But Christ invites you to eat at His table, where by the thorns and thistles of the world and the sweat of His face, He gives you His body and blood to eat and drink. This kind of fruit that Jesus offers is a food unto life, one that forgives, cleanses, encourages, and transforms us when we feed upon it. This kind of food is not taken from the dust to which we will return, to the dust that the serpent eats, to the dust on which the devil breathes a poisoned and deathly air. The food Jesus offers is taken from the body and blood of the One who overcame the devil for us, who reigns from heaven even now, who claims us. This kind of food is taken from the crucified Lord of glory, to whom we will return forever, to whom we have been brought to, and to whom we now come near to again.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; Amen.