

First Sunday in Lent

Luke 4:1-13

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The war in Ukraine continues to rage, eleven days after it began. I have a hard time gauging how much attention other people are paying to this because I am so connected. Helen and I were at my parents' over the past few days, which is the only place I still experience the phenomenon of local television news, and watching that in the background on Thursday evening after we rolled in, or yesterday during lunch, you could almost forget that a war is happening at all, were it not for a couple of local-interest stories about people with some connection to Ukraine. So apologies in advance if I find yet another connection between our Gospel reading today and this ongoing and escalating war if your attention has moved on. Here's the connection. In today's Gospel reading, the devil is tempting Jesus to use the power he has to get what he wants. But Jesus refuses. The president of Russia, on the other hand has, in my estimation, succumbed to that temptation. He has been looking for years for an opportunity to bring Ukraine back under Russian control. Eight years ago he annexed the Crimean Peninsula from southern Ukraine and more or less got away with it. In the meantime, he's been working to weaken the U.S. and its allies while building up the strength of his own armed forces. And now he's using the power he has accumulated to secure a legacy for himself and to right what he perceives to be a past wrong in the dissolution of the Soviet Union. And he is doing this both at the expense of the Ukrainian nation and of the individual civilians and soldiers who are bearing the brunt of his use of power.

But really, that's all I want to say about the war on Ukraine. It serves this morning as just one of the more obvious and egregious examples of the abuse of power that is endemic to humankind. In other words, the devil's temptations here are our temptations too. And by that I don't mean just that we fall prey to the allure of power, although we surely do. I mean that we often play the role of the devil with one another. We have embodied his world view and his tactics. And we don't even need to leave the Gospel of Luke to see that play out. Our reading today ends with this sentence: "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time." When do you suppose that opportune time was? The devil is mentioned only one more time in Luke, and it's in a parable that Jesus tells, not a story about the devil returning to tempt Jesus again. So is this a loose thread, then? Did Luke just forget about the devil coming back at an "opportune time"? Not if you read carefully. Do you remember where Jesus was again tempted to abandon his mission? You might think of when Peter tried to stop Jesus from going to Jerusalem to be handed over to death. That's one example. You might think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, asking the Father to "take this cup away," to spare him from death. That's another example. But what about his crucifixion? Do you remember the soldiers offering him sour wine? Not unlike the devil's temptation to feed himself in our text today, maybe. But here's where I think it's obvious: the devil's temptations return in the words of the leaders, the soldiers, and one of the two who were crucified with him. "If you are the King of the Jews," if you are the Messiah, "save yourself!" Three times that temptation is spoken at Jesus' crucifixion. But no devil is mentioned there. None is needed. The same words trip easily off the tongues of those who crucified him, those who were crucified with him, and those who were just looking on. That's because these words of the devil are our words too. "Serve yourself!" we say to Jesus, "That's what *we* do whenever *we* get any kind of power. And you've got *lots* of power. You're the Son of God! So, go on, *use that power!*"

The devil's words are our words because we know how the world works. If you don't look out for yourself, no one else will. That's just the way it is. And like the sun rising in the

east, we trust that it will always be so. Imagining that you can change the way the world works by extraordinary acts of piety, or by prayer, or faithfulness to God, is delusional at best, we think to ourselves, even if we might not say that in front of the pastor or our church friends. And why would you want to change things anyway? Things generally work out well for those who have power, especially those of us who are in the favored demographic.

Captivated by this devilish mindset, we attempt to use God – when we think about God at all – in the service of our own agendas. Jesus responds to all of the devil’s temptations here with the words of scripture. But the devil also knows scripture. The difference is in how they use it. “Go ahead, throw yourself off the top of the temple,” the devil says to Jesus. “God has promised that his angels will help you.” That’s today’s psalm that he’s quoting. And where else have we seen people justifying risky behavior, confident that God will be there to help them do whatever they want? I’ll let you come up with your own examples. But Jesus’ use of scripture goes in the other direction, away from the self and toward God. “One does not live by bread alone,” Jesus says, pointing to what follows from Deuteronomy 8 that we live by the word of God. “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.” “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” And Jesus’ desire in the garden to be spared the pain of his trial and crucifixion he himself counters with “not my will, but yours be done.”

Jesus takes this approach all the way to his death. “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing,” he says from the cross, looking out not for his own interests, but for ours. Here God’s power is made known in weakness. Jesus endures his trial to save us from a trial that we would surely fail if not for him. God’s will, and not ours, is the only way to life. To be sure, it is a way that leads to death, but then also through death to resurrection. All other ways, those ways we so enthusiastically urged on Jesus and each other, end badly.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, baptized into Jesus’ death and resurrection, we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. That same Spirit gives us confidence in the promise of our baptism that we belong to Christ and share his life, and that faith and trust draw us out of our self-centered agendas and into God’s loving, self-giving agenda on behalf of the world. Then, trusting in the promise of our baptism, and fed and nourished by his body and blood, we are led by the Spirit back into the wilderness of the world. The devil is still there, still up to his old tricks. Only now we see them for the deadly lies they are, and we parry the devil’s assaults with gospel of Jesus Christ. We live now not by bread alone but by the Word of God, and it is that bread of life we now urge upon the world.

Cling to that vision. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.