

Matthew 4:1-11
 "Opposites"
 Lent 1A
 March 1, 2020

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 4: "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

I. Garden and Wilderness

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

You might imagine that Nancy and I have been thinking and talking about opposites lately. Take Edmonton and Phoenix, for example – Minus 35 verses plus 25. Ice and snow verses sun and gentle warm rain. That's winter. Big difference in the summer too. Opposites in climate. Other opposites: Day verses night. Light verses darkness. Tall verses short. All kind of opposites!

It's "opposite day" for our Lord Jesus, the second Adam, in our Gospel lesson. The first Adam, you'll remember, got a lush garden with all sorts of fruit trees; the second Adam gets the wilderness and scarcity. The first Adam's menu said "all you can eat;" the second Adam is fasting for forty days and forty nights. The first Adam had Eve as a companion, because it is not good to be alone; the second Adam is alone.

Well, almost: Satan is there in the wilderness, just like he was in Eden. In fact, while it looks like opposite day from Eden in every other way, here's what Eden and the wilderness have in common. Satan is there, doing his usual act of tempting. His temptations have led to the world being turned from Garden into wilderness in the first place. He's still around in our Gospel lesson, and he's pretty much using the same temptations that worked so well the first time.

When Satan approached Eve, he put her focus on the one thing she couldn't have: fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. She could be full and satisfied every day, all the time, from all the other available food; so he pointed her to the forbidden fruit: "Does it really have to be this way, Eve? Why not eat from that tree, too? Why don't you look after yourself?" And Eve, who had everything, gave in to temptation. She repeated God's command first, but then she broke it anyway. On opposite day in the wilderness, circumstances are far different: Jesus is fasting for forty days. He's hungry, but it's a chosen hunger. Food is scarce in the wilderness, but this is no problem for Jesus: as the Son of God, He can turn stones into bread with a Word. So the tempter comes and reminds Him: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." In other words, "It doesn't have to be this way, and You know it. You're the Son of God—why are You hungry? Why don't You look after Yourself?" Jesus responds, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.'" Like Eve, He quotes the Word against the devil; unlike Eve, He's not going to give in. It's opposite day.

When Satan tempted Eve, he said, "'You will not surely die' if you eat the forbidden fruit." It was a lie; but then, Satan is always a liar. In effect, he whispered to her, "You've got nothing to lose, everything to gain. Why do you think so little of yourself? You're Eve, after all. Do what you want." For this second recorded temptation in our Gospel lesson, Satan takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and says, "If you are the Son of God, throw Yourself down, for it is written, 'He will command His angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" How crafty of the devil to quote Scripture at Jesus, twisted just enough to serve his ends. In other words, "You will not surely die. Why do You think so little of Yourself? You're the Son of God, and the Son of God doesn't die. Prove it: show everybody that You can take care of Yourself. You're Jesus, after all. You shouldn't die as the sinless Son of God...ever." Jesus responds, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Where Eve will not deny herself what she wants, Jesus does. It's opposite day.

When Satan tempted Eve, he said of the forbidden fruit, "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." In other words, "You could be so much more—you could be like God. Why stay in the place that God has put you if you can be and have so much more?" In our Gospel lesson, Satan shows Jesus the all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, then says, "All these I will give you, if you fall down and worship me." In other words, "You're the Son of God. You shouldn't be hungry in the desert with Your eyes set on a silly cross. You could be so much more—You're not just like God, but You are God. It's just that Your Father's plan is holding You back. Why stay in the place that He's put You if You can be so much more?" Eve wanted more than everything God gave her and ended up with worse than nothing. Jesus denies Himself everything to accomplish His Father's will. It's opposite day.

Throughout the entire temptation of Eve, the first Adam stood by in sinful silence. You barely hear about him in the account of that temptation. God had given him His command, His Word to preach: "You must not eat of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden"; instead, the first Adam failed to speak God's Word, and fell into sin. The Second Adam, suffering the hardships brought upon by the fall of the first, keeps speaking God's Word and doesn't sin, because "Man shall not live by bread alone, but [man shall live] by every word that comes from the mouth of God." It's opposite day.

But why?

Remember when the temptation of Christ in the wilderness takes place: it is right after His baptism. Remember how strange the idea of baptizing Jesus was to John, how the Baptist tried to prevent it: his baptism was a baptism of repentance for sinners, and Jesus wasn't sinful. So why did Jesus demand to be baptized? To take His place among sinners. In baptism, their sins are washed off of them. At His baptism, their sins were washed onto Him. From His baptism on, Jesus' path is clear: He's on His way to death on the cross, bearing the sin of the world as His

burden. That's where the opposites begin: sinners go into the water and come out forgiven. Jesus goes into the water and comes out marked as the condemned Sinner.

Don't forget: when Jesus undergoes this baptism, God the Father declares, "This is My Son, in whom I am well-pleased." This is the plan for salvation. Not only that, but the Spirit descends upon Jesus—and, because this is part of that plan for salvation, it's the Spirit who drives Jesus into the wilderness.

Since Jesus has taken His place among sinners in the Jordan River, He endures the wilderness—the poverty and the hunger, the thorns and thistles—that they deserve for their sin. Because they had everything and lost it all, He has nothing in order to gain back everything for them. Because they could not resist temptation, He does it for them. Because they deserve death for sin, He dies to give them life.

The temptation in the wilderness is not some oddity, just a funny thing that happened on the way to Calvary. The second Adam, Jesus, is undoing what the first Adam did. Where Satan won the round in Eden, Jesus hands him a stinging defeat in the wilderness: because after forty days and forty nights of hunger and temptation, Jesus emerges from the wilderness as the sinless Son of God—and because He is sinless, He can still be the Sacrifice for the sins of the world. On He goes from there, the sinless Son of God bearing the sins of the world—so that sinners can have His righteousness. It's all the opposite of what He and they deserve. And it's the opposite of what you deserve, too.

II. Opposite Day for You

You're tempted all the time, and the devil uses the same old, tired script. It's quite the accusation that you still fall for the same old temptations. It may be a different time and place and object of temptation, but it still comes back to this. The devil whispers, "Does it really have to be this way? Shouldn't you really take care of yourself? "Why do you think so little of yourself, that you deprive yourself of what you want? You're you after all. Do what you want.

"You could be so much more—Why stay where God has put you, confined you if you can be and have so much more?"

Pick a sin, and I'll argue it comes back to this. You're constantly tempted to look after yourself first, at the expense of God and others.

Think 4th Commandment, "Honor your father and your mother," which commands honor toward parents and all authorities. The evil one constantly needles you: "Why do you do what authority figures say? Don't you know better than they do? You could be so much more if you just looked after yourself and did what you want. Ignore the curfew. Sabotage your boss. Make fun of your teacher. Keep your tax payment for yourself. Why do you let them keep you in that little box?"

Think 5th Commandment, "You shall not kill." Satan's twisting you up on this one, too. Why do you think so little of yourself when others hurt you and insult you? Why not strike back? Why not plot revenge? Why not bear grudges and delight when they get hurt? Why deprive yourself of the satisfaction of their discomfort? Does it really have to be this way?"

Think 6th Commandment, "You shall not commit adultery," and know that the devil is hard at work with this: "Did God really say that you shouldn't fill your mind with whatever you want? Is it really fair that He says to flee lustful desires? Does it really have to be this way, where intimacy is reserved for marriage? Shouldn't **you** be making the decision? It's your body, after all. Do what you want."

Think 7th Commandment, "You shall not steal," and throw in the 9th and 10th against coveting. The devil tempts: "Is it really fair that your neighbor has better stuff than you do? Don't you deserve to have better employees than your competition? Why do you deprive yourself of stuff that the company won't miss and isn't using anyway? Why aren't you looking after yourself better?"

Think 8th Commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." The devil whispers, "Are you serious with this thought of just taking the insults of others, of turning the other cheek? Don't you deserve better than that? If you don't defend yourself, who will? You're you: you're not like that lowlife who's slandered you—shouldn't you give him a taste of his own medicine?"

We haven't yet mentioned the first three commandments, but that's the devil's real target. With every temptation, he asks, "Did God really say?", and with every sin he's got you following your will rather than God's. Every time he tempts you with "You're you, and you deserve better," he's got you valuing your own name over the Lord's name. And with every temptation, Satan says, "Do what you want. That way, you will be like God."

If you never think along these lines, then you have no need for forgiveness. But whenever you put yourself first, think you deserve more or take offense that others have a sweeter deal, you've already fallen prey to temptation. The curse of sin is for you. In other words, for your sin you deserve deprivation and death.

And that is why Jesus is in the wilderness. Opposite day is for you. You deserve deprivation—none of God's gifts and blessings, so Jesus is the One deprived even of bread in the wilderness. You deserve accusations and condemnation for your sin—read through the accounts of Jesus' suffering, and marvel that He takes all the accusations and doesn't defend Himself, because He's accepting them on your behalf. You deserve death for your sin, for imagining yourself to be like God; so the Son of God, under no illusions, goes to the cross and stays on the cross in your place.

It's opposite of how it ought to be. That's the Gospel.

Never, ever think that forgiveness comes cheap. It is free to you, but only because Jesus has paid such a price. You grow cranky and feel cheated if you miss a meal: Jesus fasts and endures the hunger you deserve. You live a life with lots of nice things and covet more: the King of kings goes to the cross without home or possessions, to give you the treasures of heaven. You're easily tempted to do whatever makes your eyes or your body happy: the sinless Son of God endures scourge, nails and cross on His body in your place. Forgiveness doesn't come cheap: it comes at the cost of Christ's own blood.

But it comes. It comes to you by the work of the Holy Spirit, in the means of grace, because it is God's will. It comes as the Spirit works through every word that proceeds from the mouth of God, proclaiming, washing and feeding in His Word and Sacraments. Jesus has intentionally taken your place as the Sinner who suffers and is damned by God in your place. He has suffered hell on the cross so that heaven is yours. Risen again, He comes to you with mercy and grace, not wrath and judgment. This is God's plan—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—for your salvation. That's why He baptized you in His name. That's why He continues to provide His Word and His Supper. The temptation and cross are no accident, but God's plan so that you might live by every Word that comes from the mouth of God. For every Word that comes from the mouth of God is directed to tell you this truth: that for the sake of Jesus, you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen ("Create in me")