

5 March 2006  
Lent 1

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

## Jesu Juva

“Repent and Believe the Gospel”

Text: Mark 1:12-15; Genesis 22:1-15; Romans 8:31-39

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The First Sunday in Lent is always set aside to remember the Temptation of our Lord. Right after His Baptism, Jesus is driven out alone into the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights, fasting, and being tempted by Satan. The old evil foe who couldn't get Jesus killed at His birth with all the other infants in Bethlehem by King Herod, is now trying to derail Jesus at the beginning of His public ministry. If Satan can get Jesus to sin right out of the box, right after His big “coming out” at the Jordan, then all will be well in the kingdom of darkness.

Now Matthew and Luke, when we read their accounts of the Temptation, tell us what those (or what some of those) temptations were – but interestingly, Mark doesn't. In His typical, man-of-few-words fashion, Mark simply states the fact. If you want the details, consults volumes one and three of the Gospels. . . . Now, that brevity makes it somewhat difficult to preach on this text – not much to elaborate on. But perhaps that was Mark's point. Perhaps he is not so much interested in what Satan is doing here, or in how Jesus – the man – responds to the temptation, or on the battle with temptation itself, *as He is in what God the Father is doing here*. And it is in *the second half* of today's Gospel reading – the oft neglected half – that Mark leads us in this direction, when he says: ***“Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.’ ”***

Which then leads one to the question: what is this gospel that Jesus was proclaiming, and that we are to believe in? And for Mark, **it is this**: the gospel is that the Father throws His beloved Son out into the wilderness, into isolation and hunger, into the midst of the wild animals, to face the hungry jaws of the wildest animal of all, Satan. **It is this**: that while the Father stopped the hand of Abraham from descending upon the sacrifice of his only son Isaac, He did not stop *His own* hand from offering the life of *His* only Son,

sending Him as a sacrificial Lamb into this beastly world of sin. **And it is this:** that the Father thus sent His Son as a sheep among wolves, *knowing* what would happen. . . . And to this Mark says: *This is the Gospel of the Lord. Thanks be to God!*

All of which doesn't sound much like good news. It sounds like a father mistreating his son. But Mark will now spend the rest of his Gospel elaborating on this gospel, and expanding it, and showing you more details as to how it is true. But already by verse 15 here, he has presented a very important truth, that we would do well to ponder, especially at the beginning of this Lenten season: **that in this man Jesus, we hear and see God most for us.** In Him, we hear and see the gospel of God. The gospel that is not anything that we do or that we *can* do – but all of what God does *for us*. **For the gospel *isn't* something that can be done by us – it can only be believed.**

Yet unfortunately, for many, Lent has devolved into a season not about what *God* has done *for us*, but about what we do *for God*. The forked tongue of Satan has convinced us that Lent is *40 Days of Purpose*; that it is about what I give up; or it becomes a program to set me Ablaze!™. And with such a mindset, the story of Jesus' temptation becomes not gospel to be believed, but a story to teach *us* how to resist temptation. The story of Abraham is told not as gospel to be believed, but as an example of what level of faith *our* faith should attain. And even if the Church just tells me to believe, then believing becomes something that I will *do*, and try harder at, and get better at! . . . And so for many, maybe even sometimes for us, Lent, like so much else in our world today, becomes just another self-improvement project, with our regular Wednesday night stop at *Church Depot* to pick up the holy tools and materials I need. *You can do it! We can help.*

But that is exactly what Mark is steering us away from! And so he says, very plainly and clearly and in his get-to-the-point way, to you and to me: ***repent and believe in the gospel.*** **Repent** and stop kissing the scaly feet of self-improvement. **Repent** and stop believing in your believing! **Repent** and stop thinking that you could be Abraham and do what God asks; that you could be Jesus and beat the devil. **Repent** and stop making yourself your own idol. Because if Christianity and the Christian life and getting to Heaven were like *American Idol*, who would be calling in to vote for you? . . . (*wait*) . . . Yeah, that's what I thought.

***Repent and believe the gospel.***

Lent is not my *40 Days of Purpose*, it is Jesus' 40 days of purpose. It is not about what I give up, but what Jesus gave up for me. It is not about setting me Ablaze!™, but that

Jesus became the burnt offering on the altar of the cross in my place. And all this not because the Father was mistreating His Son, but because the Son *wanted* to do this for us. He *wanted* to do this **for you**.

And so the father and son start up the mountain. The wood is cut, and laid upon the son's back to carry. They arrive at the place. The son is bound to the wood. But he says nothing. He does not cry out or rebel. This is to be. The sacrifice is ready, and the son, the one and only son, the son of the promise, is about to fall under the knife. And the knife plunges down. This time, *it is not stopped*. The life blood pours out. The eyes of the son close in death. He gives up his spirit. . . . The Son of God is dead. ***"He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all . . ."***

But Abraham knew. Abraham knew that if his son were to be sacrificed on that altar, it would be for only one reason: in order *to bring him back to life again*. And so he says, ***"I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you."*** (cf. Heb 11:19) . . . And so it was with the Son of God. There was only one reason why Jesus was sacrificed on the altar of the cross – so that He might be brought back to life again. So that through His death and resurrection, the curse of sin and death that weighs heavy around *our* necks would be defeated. And so Jesus dies to live. He dies, so that we may live. He dies, and the curse of sin and death die with Him. And we are set free. We are unbound, like Isaac, our sin-warranted death sentence commuted, because a substitute was provided. And we are set free. The sin and death that once bound us, forgiven.

***"And so Abraham called the name of that place, 'The Lord will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.'"*** And that is true not only for Mount Moriah and son Isaac; not only for Mount Calvary and son Jesus; but also now for Mount Zion, the Church, and you. For here is where it is provided for you. And what is provided? The gospel. God for you. God for you, that you might die, in order to live. That *you* be unbound from the curse of your sin, and set free to live in forgiveness. And so in Holy Baptism, you die. You die with Christ, so that you may rise with Christ. And you are set free, forgiven. In Holy Absolution, you die. You die in repentance, letting go of all that is yours, and receiving all that is His. And you are set free, forgiven. And in Holy Communion, you die. You die as you eat and drink the body and blood of the One who died for you, that as His body and blood rose from the dead, so will yours. And you are set free, forgiven. All that you need, given to you here. God for you. And ***"if God is for us, who can be against us?"***

And that is what Lent is all about. It is not about what you do. It is not about making

you feel sorry *enough* for your sins. It is about what Mark said: ***repent and believe the gospel.*** It is about dying and rising with Christ. It is about the joy of being unbound, and set free. The joy of Isaac, when those ropes fell from his hands and feet. . . . That is our Lenten joy. For our substitute has come. And so we walk, Father and sons, back down the mountain. Back to our world and lives, to live. Not quite the same! How could we be? But confident. For on this Mount, the Lord has provided. The Lord who was tempted, and won. Who took our sins, and won. Who died, and won. *This world's prince may still scowl fierce as he will, He can harm us none – he's judged, the deed is done.*

You don't have to do it. He did it. That's what Lent is all about. ***Repent and believe this gospel!***

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus our Lord unto everlasting life. Amen.