

26 February 2012
Lent 1 / Baptism of Lucy Joyce Hensley

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“A Mighty Enemy, A Mightier Fortress”
Text: James 1:12-18; Genesis 22:1-18; Mark 1:9-15

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

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

What a marvelous few verses from James!

I know, you probably think I’m nuts for saying that. We don’t like trials and temptations, most of us don’t have a very good track record of remaining steadfast under our trials - we often cave like a house of cards when times get tough, and these verses end with sin growing into death. *Not much marvelous about that, Pastor!*

But I am undeterred. I still think they are marvelous, because they teach us to think differently. They challenge our status quo. For we usually think: Blessed is the man who *avoids* trials, who has an easy life. Not so, says James. Not so, says God. Trials here are connected to receiving the crown of life. So if you want that, if you want the crown of life, you need trials. Which is why James next says, ***Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.*** James wants you to know: your trials are gifts from a loving God and Father. They are good.

Your Father sends them to strengthen your faith, which can so easily get fat and lazy and apathetic. Your Father sends them to humble your pride, which so quickly rears its ugly head as we think more highly of ourselves than we ought and then look down on others. Your Father sends them to drive you from self-reliance to God-reliance, that you quit being so confident of yourself and realize how much you need Him; that you get out of your spiritual La-Z-Boy and down onto your knees in repentance and faith. So no, trials are not easy, but to accomplish these ends, they are good.

For what satan does, you see, is not just tempt you to sin, but to strike out on your own - following your own thoughts, your own wisdom, your own desires, your own wants, your own will, your own ways. And the end of that, James says, is death. ***But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.*** Physical death, yes. But even more importantly, spiritual death. We may not realize it, but satan does. Some sins seem harmless, but they are the seeds of death that satan is constantly sowing in your hearts and lives. Using your own desires against you, to lure you down that deadly path. Using them as the hooks for his temptations to reel you in.

So do not be deceived, James says.

We heard of a great trial in the Old Testament reading today; a trial greater, I would say, than any of us could imagine, as God tells Abraham: ***Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.*** Or in other words, don't only kill him - reduce him to ashes. Watch the life and body of your son - your only son, whom you love - go up in smoke.

Luther said that since Abraham was the greatest patriarch, he received the greatest trial. (Which makes me glad I'm not great!) Abraham had received many trials before this one. His life wasn't easy. But according to James, all were necessary; all were good. *Even this one . . .* though it's hard to imagine a trial any farther from good than this one.

The fact is that our trials do not seem good. And I won't even say "often" do not seem good - I don't know if they *ever* seem good. In fact, often it is difficult to discern what is a trial sent from God for our good and what is a temptation from satan designed to harm and kill us. It is a great art to discern these things, Luther would say. To distinguish Law and Gospel. To call good good and evil evil. To live under the cross.

But though you may not be able to discern the cause and reason of everything that is happening in your life, the solution is the same: *to rely on your good and loving Father.* To turn to Him in the midst of temptation and pray "lead us not into temptation" and ask our Father to *guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not mislead us or deceive us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice* (Small Catechism, Explanation to the Sixth Petition). To turn to Him in the midst of trial - even when He seems against you; even when He seems like He's not there, or doesn't care. To turn to Him, clinging to His Word and promises, knowing that no matter what seems to be, He is there, He does care, and He is not

against you but for you. Always. That's what Abraham did, against all odds.

For God tempts no one, James goes on to say. He does nothing to harm; all only for good.

James, therefore, goes on to say, **Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.** Now, those would perhaps be a bit more comforting if they did not seem to undermine the Holy Gospel that we heard today! For there we heard that Jesus is thrown out into the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by satan. Forty days of relentless attacks and temptations. But if, as James says, **God cannot be tempted with evil**, what do we make of this? Either, it seems that they weren't real temptations, but just a sham . . . or, maybe we should just throw the book of James out of the Bible for not quite getting it right.

Well, no, let's do neither of those things. For while yes, Jesus is true God, He is also true man. And as a true, 100% man just like us, He was in fact tempted in every way like us. Mark doesn't record the specifics of the temptations for us, which maybe is good. Sometimes reading Matthew and Luke, it seems like Jesus was out in the wilderness for 40 days, but only tempted three times; and, maybe those three specific temptations are hard for you to relate to. But Mark makes it clear just how hard this was. Jesus was under relentless attack for 40 days. *Real temptations.*

Which is the lot of every Christian. Mark tells us that **immediately** after Jesus was baptized He had a bulls-eye on His back . . . just like Lucy today. Baptism is no game for satan. Today he is *furiosus*. He does not like it at all when in that water of Word and Spirit and promise a child of God is made. From that moment on, Lucy received a very powerful, relentless, and life-long enemy. Which would be quite frightening if that's *all* she received!

But it is not *all* she received. For there, she also received the forgiveness of all her sins, and a source of refuge for future sins and failures, which surely will come! When she succumbs to the temptations of the evil one, as we all do, the promise of her baptism still remains. A place - like it is for us - to return in repentance and faith and know that your Father has not rejected you, that you are a child of God, and that your sins are forgiven. His Word and promise are sure.

And in that water she - like you and I - received also the Spirit of our Lord to guide her and strengthen her and be with her always in this fight. To help you to pray and to pray for you. To direct you to the cross of your Saviour and see there His great love for you. And to sanctify you, to make you holy. So while yes, she - and you and I - have a great and mighty enemy in this world, *greater is the One in us than the one who is in the world* (1 John 4:4).

And this we see in the One whose Spirit we have received, the One who was tempted in every way as we are . . . but who won. **Jesus is the Lamb that God would provide.** He is the Lamb who went uncomplaining forth (LSB #438) from heaven and into our world, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He is the Lamb who went uncomplaining forth to the water of the Jordan to be baptized into our sin. He is the Lamb who went uncomplaining forth to do battle against satan in the wilderness. And the Lamb who went uncomplaining forth to the altar of the cross, to offer Himself for the sin of the world. For Lucy's sin, her parent's sins, and your sins and mine.

And so there is comfort for us in those marvelous words of James today! Yes, for Jesus is the man who remained steadfast under trial. Jesus is the man who received the crown of life. And Jesus is the man who then promised that crown of life to you. Today, Lucy received that promise from Him as (continuing with the words of James), she was **brought forth to a new life** from the font **by His Word of truth**, to **be a part of the firstfruits**, a part of Jesus, in His resurrection to eternal life.

And it is so. We have a mighty enemy, but an even mightier fortress (LSB #656). There are many trials and temptations we face in this life, but our Lord sets His table before us in the presence of our enemy (Psalm 23:5). And the enemy is furious about this too. He could not get Jesus to turn stones into bread, and He cannot stop Jesus from turning this bread into His Body and this wine into His Blood, to feed us, forgive us, and strength us with the medicine of eternal life. And He is always here for you in this way - in your trials and in your temptations, your failures and your weakness. Take eat, take drink. You are not alone. *Lo, I am with you always, to the very end of the age* (Matthew 28:20).

So welcome, Lucy, to the family! Welcome also to the battle. And welcome to the church of your Lord Jesus Christ, in whom you are safe, in whom you are blessed, and to whom you now belong.

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 faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.