

21 February 2021  
The First Sunday in Lent

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“The Battle to Repent and Believe”

Text: Mark 9:2-9; James 1:12-18; Genesis 22:1-18

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

If Mark was writing his Gospel today, he would have put it this way: *The Spirit immediately threw Jesus to the wolves*. Or, to use an even more modern saying: *The Spirit immediately threw Jesus under the bus*. The giant bus, that is, driven by satan, seeking to run us over and take away our spiritual lives. Or, the satanic wolf, with his foul death-breath and his large fangs seeking to grab hold of you and not let you go.

That’s what Mark wants you to know. Unlike Matthew and Luke, he doesn’t give us any details about Jesus’ temptations while out there in the wilderness. But he does use that much more violent-sounding verb. Matthew and Luke say that Jesus was “led out” into the wilderness. Sacrificial language. Maybe from Isaiah. *Like a lamb led to the slaughter* (Isaiah 53:7). Not Mark. For him it is a fight. A fight to the finish. Our English translation said that *the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness*. The Greek actually says that Jesus was *thrown out* there. Thrown out there to fight. For you.

Mark doesn’t even tell us how it ended. Jesus got angels in His corner, though, Mark tells us. But they’re not fighting like we hear on All Saints Day - Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon and his angels (Revelation 12:7). No, this is no heavenly battle, but an earthly one. And one that Jesus must fight alone. The *angels are ministering to Him*, but this is Jesus thrown to the wolf, thrown under the bus, thrown into the wilderness *to be tempted*. For you.

He must have won, though. Because next Mark tells us that Jesus shows up in Galilee, preaching. Proclaiming that *the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel*. The time has come. The King is here. We no longer hear of satan, though we will. He’s not done yet. But for now, the King emerges from the wilderness in tact. Victorious. So *repent and believe in the gospel*. Repent and believe this good news. That Jesus has come to fight for us, and wins.

Perhaps Mark doesn’t give us more details because this isn’t the feature presentation in His Gospel. This episode is more like the movie trailer - just giving you enough details to whet your appetite. To read on for the main event, as the battle continues, Jesus casting out demons and unclean spirits, until the climactic battle that takes place on Golgotha.

Interestingly, the shorter ending of Mark's Gospel doesn't tell us who won that battle either. Only that the tomb is empty. But we already know, don't we? And Jesus shows up in Galilee again. Victorious.

But here, at the beginning of this Lenten season, we focus on the beginning of the battle. *Not so much* that Jesus is tempted as we are. But that Jesus is victorious. That He comes out of the wilderness in tact. This is what Mark wants you to know. And believe. And rejoice in.

Because *we don't*, right? Emerge from our temptations in tact and victorious. At least, I know, I don't! And I'm not even in the wilderness! But in my cushy house with my cushy life and really, having it pretty easy, having all I need. And yet how often do *I* succumb to satan's temptations? How often do I put me first, above God and others? How often do I do what pleases me, not God? How often do I cave to pride, anger, or jealousy? And how quickly! Matthew and Luke tell us that Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days being tempted, but how often does satan not even need 40 hours, or 40 minutes, or 40 seconds with me! And I suspect you, too. To get you to disobey your parents, or rebel against or disrespect authority. To get you to hate and lash out in anger. To get you to lust and blow your chaste and decent life out of the water. Or to not love your spouse as you should. To take what is not yours, or to resent your neighbor getting more than you. To use your tongue to gossip, to tear down others, to hurl barbs of criticism, to speak what is not helpful or good. To put what you want first and let others fend for themselves. And all the while calling yourself a Christian. Having Christ's name on you but not praying as you should, not speaking of Him as you should, not spending as much time in His Word as you should. Putting yourself first, that is, making yourself God and expecting others to serve you and do your bidding.

Sound about right?

So it really is pretty good news - *very* good news! - that what Adam could not do and what we cannot do, Jesus did. He was thrown to the wolf, thrown under the bus, thrown out into the wilderness, and came out in tact. Victorious. So ***repent and believe in the gospel.***

This Gospel, as James put it for us today: that ***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.***

But wait a second, Pastor! You just said that's not you and that's not us! That we don't remain steadfast. So why is this good news for us?

Because while you are not the man, *Jesus is*. He is the blessed one. He remained steadfast under trial. He withstood the test. And He received the crown of life . . . ***which God has promised to those who love him!*** Did you hear that? It didn't say: which God has promised *to those who win*, but to ***those who love Him***; to those who love, who believe in, Jesus. **The**

**crown of life that Jesus won is promised to those who love, who believe in, Him.**

That's how we receive it! James goes on to say where sin and death comes from for us. From our own sinful, disordered desires, our own sinful inclinations that we are born with. And he's right. So, he says, **do not be deceived**. Do not be deceived into thinking you can do it, or that it comes from you. **Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above**. From your Father. Who **brought you forth** - that's birth language - by **the word of truth**. By your baptism. For that's where you were born from above to be a child of your heavenly Father and receiving then and there the crown of life that Jesus won for you when the Spirit threw Him to the wolf, threw Him under the bus, for you. Jesus, another good and perfect gift that came down from heaven, that came from the Father, for you. So **repent and believe in the gospel**. Repent of all that you have done, and believe in all that Jesus has done, for you. And then you too have life. A new life. A victorious life.

A . . . could we say . . . *Abraham life*?

The story that we heard about him and Isaac today is astounding. And is, to be honest, a story we do not understand. Why God would tell him to do that. How Abraham could do that! This is a test the magnitude of which I hope neither you nor I ever have to endure. I mean, being a martyr, offering yourself, is one thing. But a loved one? Someone holds a knife to your neck and asks if you are a Christian is one thing. But hold that same knife to my son's neck, or my spouse's neck, or my Mom or Dad's neck, and ask me if I'm a Christian . . . ?! It's a First Commandment test, isn't it? Do I fear, love, and trust in God above all things? Or do I love my child more? Do I fear losing a loved one more? Do I trust in myself and what I can do to get out of this situation more?

Some people do lose children. Maybe not in this way, but to violence, mass shootings, drugs, cancer, suicide. And it causes some to lose faith. To turn *away* from God rather than *to* Him for help. Satan using things like these - and more - to convince us that God is not a good Father. That He is, in fact, not good at all. Because satan doesn't want God to be your Father. *He* wants to be your daddy.

But Abraham didn't listen to those doubts and fears, those temptations to turn against God. Against the God who miraculously gave him this son (another good and perfect gift from above), even though he thought it impossible - that he and Sarah were just too old. God had done the impossible. And Abraham believed he would now, too. The book of Hebrews tells us that. That even if he had to go through with it, that he believed **that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back** (Hebrews 11:19). For Abraham had already give up Isaac in his heart, even though God did not make his hand go through with it.

But today we heard that God's did. God did not stop His own hand, did not spare His own Son, but threw Him to the wolf, threw Him under the bus, *threw Him onto the cross*, for

you. And then not figuratively, but really and truly, received Him back in the resurrection. Victorious. All for you. To give you that crown of life that only Jesus could win.

That you too begin to live an Abraham life. Not that Abraham was perfect. He had his share of failures. But a life that believes the words and promises of God. That what God says and promises, He will do. Even if it doesn't make sense to us. Even if it seems impossible. For as the Scriptures also tell us, *nothing is impossible with God* (Mark 10:27; Luke 1:37). And when we think so, or doubt, or fear, to ***repent and believe in the Gospel***. To turn to Jesus and not to our own efforts or strength, for only He can give us the forgiveness, faith, strength, and life we need.

So this First Sunday in Lent reminds us once again of the battle in our hearts and for our hearts. A real battle, and yet one we need not fear. For we know how it turned out, and how it will turn out for us. Because we know the Blessed one. The one who remained steadfast for us. The one who won the crown of life for us. The one crucified for us, risen from the dead for us, and now given to us here in His Body and Blood. Satan wants to be your daddy, but you already have a Father, who gives you always - and only - good and perfect gifts. The Father who gave His only-begotten Son for you. The Son who gave His life, laid down His life, for you. And the Spirit who threw Him and His life to the wolf for you, and yet was also with Him every step of the way.

***The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.*** And if Mark were writing his Gospel today, he'd say the exact same thing. For then and now, it is the same. Turn to Him, believe His words and promises, and live. It's not easy. It's a battle every day. But the Spirit, a good and perfect gift from above, given you in *your* Baptism, is with you too. To fight with you. To fight for you. Every step of the way.

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.