

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to St. Matthew, the fourth chapter.

*<sup>1</sup>Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup>He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. <sup>3</sup>The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” <sup>4</sup>But he answered, “It is written,*

*‘One does not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”*

*<sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup>saying to him, “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,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”*

*<sup>7</sup>Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”*

*<sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; <sup>9</sup>and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” <sup>10</sup>Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written,*

*‘Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.’”*

*<sup>11</sup>Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

The gospel of the Lord. **Praise to you, Lord Christ.**

Grace, mercy and peace are yours from the Triune God. Amen.

Today’s Gospel tells of Jesus’ temptation in the desert. His time of being **tested** and his forty-day fast become the basis for our Lenten pilgrimage.

They are deep, heady theological readings, our morning scriptures.

In the Genesis myth, original created humans are tested by means of a talking serpent; they fail and fall into sin and death.

In Matthew, Jesus is tested by means of “that old serpent, the devil,” and Jesus succeeds. He passes the test. As the writer to the Hebrews (in 4:15) declares, “We have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

In Romans, Paul takes up the story of original failure to prove how God provides a superior solution through Christ, who we already learned passed every test for us by proxy.

Paul explains that although the fall of the first couple into sin and death affects the many—meaning all of us—the grace of God through Christ, reaching the many, by far and away surpasses any and all outcomes of the fall.

Following the Savior’s example, we too expect to be tested during the time of Lent—to be examined by the Spirit as we examine ourselves. We expect to make such changes as to lean into holy austerity or self denial, not for our own benefit, but for the sake of loving others better. For forty days.

By the way, have you ever wondered how the 40 days work out? You count out 40 days from Ash Wednesday till you get to Holy Saturday, the day before Easter. But the Lenten Sundays don’t count in the 40 day reckoning. So I guess every Sunday we get to have a day off from practicing Lent 😊.

Anyway, the responses of Jesus at his trial in the desert underscore recommended responses for us when we face life tests:

- To live by God’s word alone,
- Not to put God to the test by showing distrust and
- To worship the Lord God and serve God only

To live by God’s word alone—what does this mean? Here is at least part of the meaning:

As people of God, we are a people of promise. We are a people of gospel promise.

Living by God’s word alone means we are committed to have the good news of forgiveness, grace, freedom and renewal frame and form, shape and reshape our lives.

I believe I have already told you what I consider to be the most important priestly duty I do on a Sunday morning. It is to declare these words or others like them:

*Almighty God, who is rich in mercy,  
has given his only Son to die for us,  
and for his sake  
God forgives us all our sins.  
As a called and ordained minister  
of the church of Christ  
and by his authority alone,  
I therefore declare to you  
the entire forgiveness of all your sins;  
in the name of the Father,  
and of the + Son  
and of the Holy Spirit.*

There was a time when Jesus was teaching about his upcoming arrest, crucifixion, burial and resurrection. He prefaced his instruction with, “Let these words sink down into your ears.”

So we too, whenever we hear the words of absolution, need to give pause; let the words sink down into the ears of our heart.

Sometimes, as well, God must stir up trouble to inspire and motivate repentance and forgiveness. Pressures reach a boiling over point of faith crisis where our only recourse is to cry out to God for help. Sometimes we literally cry.

That certainly was my teenage experience of desperately needing to find God. I yelled out loud, “God, if you really exist, reveal yourself to me!”

I have done many stupid things since then—and some really good things, like marrying Lynn and having a family and pursuing my calling—and all through everything I have never not known a time where God has not been there for me.

For my number one daughter, her breaking point happened when she was about four years old. I vividly remember her in the front room of our house crying with tears both to Jesus and her daddy at the same time, “Please help me. I can’t make it on my own.” Again, since that day, she has never not had a personal faith.

When we pause to confess and receive absolution, we are remembering again for ourselves the beginning faith of our baptism and calling to mind those personal experiences in which repentance and forgiveness have been the most real.

In addition, as we go about our lives both in and outside the church, we need to have a heightened self-awareness of how God’s gospel promises hover over us wherever we go.

For example, we sometimes may worry about the practical state of our personal holiness. As I said on Wednesday night, we may fret over not living up to a certain attitude or task. We wonder if we are capable enough or accomplished enough or worthy or acceptable or just plain enough.

Whereas we may, at times, strive for some higher degree of holiness or perfection, and whereas we might get anxious or fretful or self-debasing over apparently falling short, God’s word of promise declares that not one parcel of holiness can be earned by us or behaviorally achieved or expressed by us, but that every measure of it comes down through his spoken gift of grace and goodness. We are holy and acceptable and capable and worthy for no other reason than God simply says it is so.

Jesus said in John 15 (v. 3), “Now you are clean by the word that I have spoken to you.”

To the Corinthians Paul writes that their commendable qualities have all and only been conferred: “But you are washed, you are sanctified, you are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (I Corinthians 6:11).

Paul also speaks about Christ’s church being made “holy by cleansing her by the washing of water by the word,” presenting “the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind (Ephesians 5:26b-27a).

The mental awareness that holiness comes about by means of conferral and not effort does so much to remove from us all kinds of pressure to live up to some arbitrary Christian standard or the imagined expectation of others. It sets us free to love our neighbor, not because we have to, but because we want to.

Maybe this is a matter of semantics, but I have a friend with whom I go ‘round and ‘round over this issue of holiness. What he calls “progressive sanctification,” I call arbitrary situational ethics. His idea of the Christian life involves growing to become a better person or be more “biblically obedient,” and my idea of it is to keep on receiving forgiveness and inner freedom to be able to love and serve my neighbor.

Maybe we’re both talking about the same thing; maybe not. I know I bristle at the one and relaxingly welcome the other.

Earlier I said the Jesus modeled three responses to temptation:

- To live by God’s word alone,
- Not to put God to the test by showing distrust and
- To worship the Lord God and serve God only.

Arguably, if you begin to live by God’s promise alone in the way I describe, the plain results will be faith and trust in God (not putting God to the test) and worship and service to God only.

This call to receive and trust God’s word, God’s gospel promise, leading to worship and service now draws my attention back to Psalm 32.

Although we don't know David's inspiration for the psalm, many see it as a companion to Psalm 51, which is his song of repentance for sins of adultery and murder.

G. Campbell Morgan calls Psalm 32 “a psalm of penitence, but it is also the song of a ransomed soul rejoicing in the wonders of the grace of God. Sin is dealt with; sorrow is comforted; ignorance is instructed.”

James Montgomery Boice claims it was St. Augustine's favorite; that before he died he had it inscribed on a wall next to his bed so as to be able to meditate on it.

It is worth a second listening:

<sup>1</sup> *Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,  
whose sin is covered.*

<sup>2</sup> *Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,  
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

<sup>3</sup> *While I kept silence, my body wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.*

<sup>4</sup> *For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;  
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.*

Selah

<sup>5</sup> *Then I acknowledged my sin to you,  
and I did not hide my iniquity;*

*I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD’,  
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.*

Selah

<sup>6</sup> *Therefore let all who are faithful  
offer prayer to you;  
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters  
shall not reach them.*

<sup>7</sup> *You are a hiding-place for me;  
you preserve me from trouble;  
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.*

Selah

<sup>8</sup> *I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;  
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.*

<sup>9</sup> *Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,  
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,  
else it will not stay near you.*

<sup>10</sup> *Many are the torments of the wicked,  
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.*

<sup>11</sup> *Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,  
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.*

Psalm 32 fortifies us to meet the challenge of possible faith-tests during the season of Lent by promoting: trust; being open and teachable; receiving God’s deliverance and protection; practicing penitence, confession and absolution; and especially knowing the happiness and joy of forgiveness and renewal.

No matter what we go through, or what God may have to endure from us, even if we drive God crazy, quoting from today’s story time, God will “love us forever and like us for always.” Forever and ever God’s child we’ll be. Amen.