

“Battle Tested”

First Sunday in Lent

Mark 1:9-15

“And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan” Mark 1:13

“Battle tested.” To test the strength of someone or a piece of equipment we might employ that person or the piece of equipment in a type of “battle” situation. We subject that person or equipment to extreme conditions to determine perseverance, power, and stamina, among other things. And so we might think of a car “crash test” as a type of “battle testing.”

A battle test is one way we can understand the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness according to the Gospel writer, St. Mark, as we read it and reflect on it again this morning. Jesus is being “battle tested.” In this case we might say “battle tempted.” In any case, Jesus’ strength, perseverance, power, and stamina is put to the test by none other than the enemy of God, Satan himself.

In the Hebrew language, the noun, “Satan” means “accuser or adversary.” Satan first shows up in the Garden of Eden in chapter 3 of Genesis, the very beginning of the written record of God’s history of salvation. He shows up again in the account of Job and the temptation of Jesus. What is his goal? To resist the reign of God in the world. At every turn, like a bad guy is supposed to do, he is thwarting the protagonist’s plan. In this case, he is seeking to thwart God’s plan of salvation in Christ. At every turn, he is actively trying to get believers in Christ, you and me, to fear, love, and trust in someone or something else other than the one, true God. He is relentlessly trying to lead you astray.

In our Gospel lesson we heard that Jesus was baptized as the Son of God. He was enthroned as the Son of God in his baptism and began his reign in human history as God become flesh. The Father even says so from the heavens, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased” (Mk 1:11). Then, the very next sentence we read that Satan, the adversary and opponent of God, is living up to his name as he tests the strength of this Son of God in the wilderness. Can this “Holy one of God” defeat me?

The stage is set for the unfolding of Mark’s Gospel that is filled with records of Jesus healing the diseased, performing all sorts of miracles, and casting out the demons, *the helpers of Satan*. The Evangelist Mark records a cosmic battle between God and his adversary in his Gospel. The battle begins already in chapter 1 with the temptation episode in the wilderness and comes to its climax at the end of Mark’s Gospel with Jesus, the faithful Son of God, defeating Satan on the cross and through his resurrection. Jesus atones for the Sin of the world through sacrifice and death. He “wins back” all of creation that is rightfully God’s through the empty tomb.

As Christians who have received the work of the cross and the resurrection personally in our baptisms and have been caught up as believers in Christ, the victory over Satan is ours *now*. Yet, like a bad guy from a horror film who keeps lurching back up to attack, Satan keeps resisting God's reign in the world. Even *now* he is tempting you to turn away from the will of God. He is tempting you to give into your pleasures and desires, to serve yourself, even if that service is against God's will, your conscience, and your neighbor. **Even now you are being "battle tested."**

As the Apostle Peter says, in this world "Satan prowls around like a lion seeking for someone to devour" (1 Pet 5:8). In the living out of our Christian faith, we have the tendency of either over estimating our power and ability in battle with God's adversary or over estimating the power of Satan to do battle with us. When we give ourselves too much power or Satan too much we are either left with a false sense of security or we are left with a sense of hopelessness and despair.

The first error is over estimating our ability to do battle with Satan and his temptations. This error can leave us with a false sense of security. We can be fooled into thinking that we are actually a match for Satan and his temptations. In over estimating our ability to do battle with Satan and temptations so we may adopt all kinds of attitudes and actions that actually downplay the seriousness of Sin and temptations. Attitudes and actions that downplay the seriousness of our Sin and unrighteousness.

The other error of the Christian life is over estimating the power of Satan. This error can leave us with feelings of despair and hopelessness. We can be led falsely into thinking that Satan ultimately has the victory. We can risk losing the hope in Christ. If we look around the world, the domain of Satan, and only see temptation, and tools of the enemy; if we examine our own lives and only see the lost battles, then we risk losing sight of the truth that Christ holds the field" as the famous hymn, "A Mighty Fortress" says.

Instead, we trust in and find our true hope in the "battle tested" one. In the temptation scene in the wilderness, Jesus entered into the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan, the adversary of God, for forty days. Satan was testing the strength of this one who was just declared to be the Son of God at his baptism. But God, the Father, sent his Son into the world on a mission. Jesus was to live as the faithful Son of God and win the world back from the power of Satan. And so Jesus emerged from the wilderness. He was not overcome by temptation. He did not stray from the divine plan to save the world from Sin. Rather, he walked out of the wilderness and began to preach. He stepped into the region of Galilee, north of Jerusalem, and preached, "The reign of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15). Jesus continued this plan of salvation, not giving into temptation, never straying, all the way to the cross and to his death. The Son of God is faithful unto death.

The wilderness is where Satan attacks. We know the wilderness areas of our own lives where temptations and vices abound. Yet, even in the wilderness while Jesus was being tempted by Satan, we see a glimpse of the final peace that God brings through the work of Jesus on the cross and through his resurrection. The final peace he ushers in fully at his glorious return. We read that Jesus was "with the wild animals" (Mk 1:13). Jesus, the Son of God, brings peace in which "lamb and the lion are in

harmony.” As the prophet Isaiah says, we look forward to the return of Christ when “wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion shall lie down together” (Is 11:6). This picture of peace through Christ is one in which “swords are beat into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they war anymore” (Is 2:4). Even in the wilderness, before he even begins his public Ministry, Jesus brings a glimpse of the peace of the reign of God as he, the Lamb of God, lies with the wild beasts and is not devoured. This is the peace we long for here on earth. This is what politicians try to promise. But this is the peace that is promised and realized *only* through the reign of God in Christ. This is our hope. Even now, in the wilderness of this world, in the wilderness of a Lenten journey, we can look forward in hope.

The Christian life is lived faithfully when it is lived in tension. It is lived best when, **even while we experience the real, powerful temptations of Satan as we live in the world, we trust that God has already defeated Satan and reigns victoriously.** The Christian life is lived faithfully when we live with the certain hope of true peace with God, one another, and all creatures upon Christ’s return. The Christian life is lived best when we recognize that it is a battle and equip ourselves with the full armor of God, are strengthened with the Holy Sacraments and fight with the Sword of the Spirit—the Word of God. The Christian life is lived best when it is lived in Christ. He is “battle tested.” He reigns victoriously. He holds the field forever. Amen.