

To Be or Not to Be God's Son

1st Sun. in Lent – 02/26/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Matthew 4:1-11 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 1, “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”

Introduction

- ✘ This first sentence in our text is technically not the first sentence in the story of Jesus' temptation, even though it is the first verse in chapter four of Matthew's Gospel.
 - ➔ Remember, what you and I know as chapter and verse numbers do not exist in the original texts of Holy Scripture. They were added later in history to help you and me refer to and find the portions of Scripture that we want to read or talk about.
- ✘ You see, this text must properly be understood as being one unit with the text before it in Matthew chapter three; Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptizer in the Jordan. It's there, in Matthew 3:16-17 that we're told, "...when Jesus was baptized, immediately He went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on Him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, 'This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'"
 - ➔ "Then," our text today continues to tell us, "Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (v.1).
- ✘ This is crucial for us to understand folks, because the very reason that the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into this confrontation with the devil is because the "devil", which means "the slanderer"; his main goal is to try and call into question and challenge whether or not Jesus is truly worthy to be considered "the Son of God." Certainly the devil heard the Father's voice at Jesus' baptism, "This is My beloved Son", and now it's as if the devil is responding, "Challenge accepted!"
 - ➔ But you see, this is not only about this One Son's reputation and status, it is also about two other "sons" of God in Scripture and their responses to the slanderer's challenge of their sonship as well.

I. The first son of God: Adam

- ✘ We find the first son of God in our Old Testament Reading today were we have the account of how the devil, in the form of a serpent this time, challenges Adam's sonship in the Garden of Eden.
 - ➔ The challenge there was the temptation to believe that there was a status available to Adam (and Eve) that was better than being God's son – namely being God's equal. In Genesis 3:5, the devil proclaims the lie as if it were fact, "you will be like God". If only Adam would eat that one fruit that God forbade them to eat, then just being a son of God would be beneath Adam.
 - ➔ To "slander" is to harm a person's reputation, and here we see "the slanderer" living up to his name, trying to ruin Adam's reputation as a son of God; trying to convince him that this most honorable status as the crown of God's Creation; as God's own representative to rule over every plant and animal and all of earth; was actually something to be ashamed of.
 - ➔ And unfortunately Adam and Eve bought into the lie so that in one moment; with one bite of the fruit, Adam went from being a loving, trusting obedient son to a suspicious, guilt-ridden, fearful stranger of God.
- ✘ Not only did he not become God's equal, but he fell to a status far inferior to the son his Father created him to be. It truly was a fatal decision, bringing the required punishment of death not only to Adam and Eve; not only to all other creatures in the plant and animal kingdom, but to

every human being to exist from that day forward. As Paul declares in our Epistle Reading today, "...sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned..." (Rom. 5:12).

II. The second son of God: Israel (the Church)

✘ That means not only that Adam's sonship was lost, but the same sin-corrupted status was passed on to you and me and all of Adam's descendants, including those who became, and have become a part of God's chosen people.

→ From the time that God rescued His people from the hands of Pharaoh and his army; bringing them through the watery baptism of the Red Sea and declaring them to be His chosen people, Scripture has looked back and referred them as one collective "son", with the name "Israel".

✘ This "son", Israel, much like Jesus, immediately came out of the water and was led by God into the wilderness, to have his sonship tested...for 40 years. God chose Israel to receive His fatherly love and to respond with trust and obedience. Yet when God tested this son to see what was in his heart, Israel repeatedly complained and challenged the Father's love, showing that he would rather be back with Pharaoh in slavery than to have the status of God's faithful and obedient son.

→ When Jesus quotes the Bible in the face of His own temptation, He points us back to the nation of Israel's challenge with Satan – which means "the adversary". When Jesus says, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God", He is quoting Moses in Deuteronomy 8:3, who is reminding Israel that God led them in the desert and allowed them to hunger in order to see if they would trust the Father for food.

→ And Israel moaned and groaned and failed that test miserably. Even when God generously provided Manna and Quail for their bellies they still failed to appreciate their sonship and complained against the Father.

✘ And then when Jesus quotes Scripture during His second temptation saying, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test" (v.7), He is reminding us how when Israel was in the wilderness at Rephidim God tested him to see if he would still believe in His Father's presence even if he ran out of the basic necessities of life, like water.

→ Again Israel failed to act like a son and insisted that the Father prove His love by providing something for them to drink.

✘ And Jesus' final quote of Scripture, "You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve" (v.10), reminds all of God's children, in the past and all of us now in the present as the New Israel how they were challenged as they entered the Promised Land not to forget the Father and their sonship, but to serve only Him!

→ Yet once more Israel of old chose to serve and worship someone other than God, choosing themselves and even the idols and false gods of the unbelieving nations around them; following in the footsteps of God's first son, Adam.

✘ Unfortunately, Adam's and old Israel's responses continue to be the response of God's son today, the New Israel, you and me. Although our loving heavenly Father has specially chosen us, even bringing us through the miraculous, transforming waters of Holy Baptism and adopting us as His sons for salvation, what do we still so often do?

→ We frequently re-enact the willful and perverted decision of old Adam and we repeat the choice of old Israel not to be God's son. We doubt that God will give us our daily bread if the economy takes a turn for the worse or we lose our jobs. We demand that God prove His love

for us when we become ill or have a loved-one die or face the strain and stress and anxiety of a failing marriage, or a conflict with our parents or children, or reoccurring disease or health issues.

→ On the other hand, when things are going well, we still too easily push God to the fringe of our lives and set ourselves up as the center of the universe.

→ And when we do these things we choose not to be God's son. Like Adam we choose death and we put ourselves at high risk of permanent separation from our loving Father.

III. The third Son of God: Jesus

✘ Thank God, for Adam, for the old Israel, and for us the New Israel there is another son of the God, The Son of God, who when faced with the challenge to be or not to be God's son, always chose; always proved His love, trust and faithful service to God, His Father. Today's Gospel Reading shows how Satan did his very best to tempt this Son, Jesus into repeating the failures of God's previous two sons, Adam and Israel, the same failures that we too often make today.

→ The Good News is that this Son of God was victorious every time, even though Hebrews 4:15 tells us that "in every respect (He) [was] tempted as we are, yet without sin." And now, because of His victory over sin, death and Satan, in our place, His Father once again declares you and me to be His beloved sons!

✘ In the first temptation Satan attacks Jesus after He has been in the wilderness 40 days and nights without food; trying to get Him to question His Father's power to provide for His Son, just as Israel doubted the Father in the wilderness.

→ So Satan urges Jesus to use His own divine power to provide for Himself instead of trusting in the Father. Yet instead of turning stones into bread Jesus turns to "every word that comes from the mouth of God" (v.4), saving His own power to provide for life when it can be used to benefit others before Himself.

✘ In the second temptation Satan tries to get Jesus to put His Father to the test; whether God's love and power is truly there to protect and save Him if He were to throw Himself from the pinnacle of the temple, just as the people of Israel wondered whether God would provide water for them in their thirst, on the brink of death.

→ But this Son will not put His Father to the test. Instead of demanding a sign from God as Israel demanded water, Jesus puts His trust in the Father's Word declared and given with the water of His baptism: "You are My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Mt. 3:17) and Jesus' honor as God's son is confirmed.

✘ In the third and final temptation Satan goes for broke in his mad compulsion to try and break the Son's trust in His Father's word. So he holds out the lure of glory and authority, saying that he will "give" Jesus all the kingdoms of the world (as if these were Satan's to give in the first place). It's ultimately the same temptation that broke Adam, the delusional promise that he; that we could be "like God".

→ But Jesus knows the truth of His status, as Philippians 2:6 says, that "equality with God" is not something for which He ever needed to grasp – He already has it as the second person in the One Holy Triune God. And yet in one of the great mysteries of the Triune God, Jesus humbled Himself to be "born in the likeness of men" (Phi. 2:7); to serve the Father's perfect will as His only begotten Son.

→ So instead of bowing down to Satan, Jesus yields to the will of His Father, a will that ends up taking Him to His greatest glory when He is nailed to the cross and died for the sins of the entire world!

✘ The very fact that Jesus wins this victory over Satan's attacks against His sonship means that you and I now receive a threefold blessing from Him.

→ First, it means that the Father has accepted Jesus' perfect love, trust and obedience as ours as well. Yes, because of Jesus' faithfulness to His Father's will the Father now speaks the same words to us in our Baptism: "You are my beloved Son; (my beloved daughter), with whom I am well pleased!" It is not a questionable status, it is a certainty – our sonship with God, so that now we know He is with us to resist the devil whenever he tempts us by calling our sonship into question.

→ Second, Jesus' perfect and sinless life as the Son of God means that His death on the cross was suffered on our behalf. His punishment was endured to pay for our guilt. The Father's wrath against our sin, was meted out against Jesus in our place. Our guilt has been covered completely by Jesus' blood and so our sonship is set in stone. The devil cannot take it away!

→ And the third blessing from Jesus is that because of His victory over Satan and all of his temptations we now have in Jesus, as Hebrews 4:15-16 assures us, "a high priest" who is able "to sympathize with our weaknesses". And He invites us "with confidence (to) draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in (our) time of need."

Conclusion

✘ So, coming out of His baptism, the victory and certainty of Jesus' sonship with the Father means the same for you and me today, doesn't it? Not because of anything you or I have done, but entirely because of God's mighty work through His beloved Son.

→ Martin Luther teaches us of this reality in the Small Catechism when he speaks of our Father's adoptive work in baptism. He says that our baptism "indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever" (Baptism, 4th part)

✘ So when the devil comes at you, dear friends; trying to tempt you to question your sonship with God, what is your response going to be? I pray, by the power of the Holy Spirit, you will be bold to shout with confidence, "Get out of here Satan. I am a baptized child of God! Your power is worthless against me!" In the name of Jesus. Amen.