

Grace to you, and peace, from God the Creator, and from Jesus Christ, God's Son, our Lord. Amen.

As I mentioned at the outset, the title of today's message is "Temptations in the American Wilderness."

Mark, as many of you know, is the briefest of the four gospels in the New Testament. It has 16 chapters, the last of which was partially written by someone else in the second century. This is in contrast to Matthew, which has almost double the number of chapters, that is, 28. This is also in contrast to Luke, who has 24 chapters. And this is even in contrast to the Gospel of John, which has 21 chapters. Most scholars see the length of Mark as a clue, giving us evidence that this was the first of the four gospels to be written, and it makes sense: the tale is truncated at the beginning, and over the course of time, it expands and expands and expands, reliant as it was on independent source material.

The claim, in turn, that Matthew and Luke elaborate Mark along with independent source material to construct their own narratives of the life and identity of Jesus, is the predominant scholarly view. It's called the "two-source hypothesis," namely, the gospel writer of Matthew is reliant upon Mark and another source, and the gospel writer of Luke is reliant on Mark and another source, and we know how they're relying on Mark because they share the same material from Mark.

The temptation of Jesus in the wilderness is a perfect example of this process of elaboration. Mark, in fact, devotes only two verses to the temptation. He writes, as you heard in our gospel reading for today, "and the spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness 40 days, tempted by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him."

Here we have the core details, reference to the Spirit as that which drove Christ out into the wilderness; reference to the wilderness itself, which may mean the desert, but it can also be understood as "a place beyond words" more figuratively.

He spends 40 days there, which as you know in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament means "a really long time." It's like saying "umpteen-thousand years." So, he's there for 40 days, and that's a number that goes all the way back to the book of Genesis. The flood lasts 40 days or, a really long time. The Israelites wander in the wilderness for 40 years or, a really long time. Elijah runs to Mount Horeb, or Mount Sinai, for 40 days and nights—a really long time.

Beyond the 40 days, there's reference to Satan tempting him. We also hear about how wild beasts were with him and angels waited upon him.

Now notice what's missing. What's missing is the nature of the temptation itself. With what did Satan tempt Jesus? Fortunately, as I pointed out, Matthew and Luke fill in the

details. Consider Matthew 4:1-11. Notice here now we have nine more verses than in Mark 1. Here we learn that Jesus fasted. Here we learn the nature of his temptation, such that Satan tempts him with food, which symbolizes self-indulgence; he tells him to turn stones into bread. Here Satan tempts Jesus to tempt God, which means to put God to the test. So, when you hear contemporary anti-vaxxers talking about how they only need their faith in God, they don't need vaccines to avoid being infected by COVID, they are, from this perspective, tempting God. They're putting God to the test. And finally, Satan tempts Jesus with worldly power.

Satan leaves, and then, only then, do the angels enter the scene and wait upon Jesus. That means that for the course of this temptation, he was by himself.

The other version appears in Luke 4:1-13. Now we have not two verses devoted to the story, not 11 verses, but 13 verses – which again indicates that Luke came along at a later time. Here, Satan tempts Jesus at the *end* of a 40-day fast, where Jesus is famished. This helps us make sense of the first temptation, namely, food. Of course, food is going to be a temptation for someone whose belly is empty.

The next temptation is worldly power, so the order is different here. And then finally, Satan tempts Jesus to put God to the test, or to tempt God, as I mentioned a moment ago. Satan then leaves, only to return, the text indicates, at an opportune time. It's like the end of *Star Wars*, when you learn that Darth Vader will come back. He doesn't die. Satan comes back as well – in this case, back to tempt Jesus.

Now. It's easy to dismiss these temptation stories as irrelevant to our lives. After all, the Spirit has never driven any of us out into the wilderness, or so I hope; the Spirit has never compelled us to fast for 40 days, or so I hope. And none of us have had a direct encounter with Satan, or so I especially hope – and if you have I'd like to see you after the service. I have a really good exorcist in mind...

But in my opinion, these are all wrong ways of approaching our reading for today. It's better to ask not whether we are tempted in the *same* way, but how we might be tempted, not in the wilderness of Judea, but in the wilderness of America. Again: how we might be tempted not in the wilderness of Judea, but in the wilderness of America. How, in other words, do we let culture shape and dictate our lives instead of Christ? What, moreover, are the consequences, not only on our personal relationship with God, but on the people, indeed the community, the neighborhood and the world around us?

Now, obviously, I could go all Baptist on you and spend two hours on the topic of "Christ against culture." For the sake of brevity, however, I would like to name simply three ways contemporary American culture tempts us to go against our faith. Three ways our culture holds in bondage millions of people.

After that, I'd like to discuss how God in Christ can begin to free us, by giving us a place to stand in Jesus Christ. And you'll notice my reference there to "begin."

Sanctification or becoming holy is a lifelong process, which is why, instead of talking about *having been* saved, the Book of Acts talks about how we *are being* saved.

So, in what ways are we being saved? How is God and Christ beginning to free us by giving us a place to stand in Jesus Christ?

So, what are the three ways American culture distracts us from what should matter most in our lives, namely, God?

Number one: American culture tempts us to live in self-indulgent ways. Some of you will recognize this as a confession from our midweek Lenten service. American culture tempts us to live, as that service says, in self-indulgent ways. To consume. To hoard. To take what you don't need, or, as Paul Tillich once said, "to cram the whole world into your mouth."

The results of this self-indulgent lifestyle, of course, are catastrophic. Americans are more prone to obesity than people of any other developed nation. Moreover, even though the United States consists of 5% of the world's population, it consumes 25% of the world's resources – that's from *Scientific American*. That means across the world, people go hungry, because we are in bondage to self-indulgence and cannot free ourselves. That means that 26- to 28,000 children die a day across the globe from malnutrition when we stuff our bellies. We worship, indeed, the God of the Belly, as the Apostle Paul says in Philippians 3.

But Christ shows us another way. Instead of giving in to self-indulgence, He fasts, resisting Satan's first temptation to turn stones into bread. He teaches us, moreover, as evident in the feeding of the 5,000, to share, and to take no more than we need. He admonishes the rich among us to sell what we have and give our proceeds to the poor. He invites us as, an old popular slogan used to say, to "live simply so that others may simply live."

Number two: American culture not only tempts us to consume beyond what we need. It tempts us more broadly, to live only for ourselves. "We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves," we confess in our midweek Lenten confession or service, and we ignore Christ in the face of the poor.

And it's not *just* that we ignore Christ in the face of the poor. Many voices in American culture, especially among Christians, tempt us to *blame* the poor for their circumstances. This is the heresy of the prosperity gospel. It says that God's favor is evident in material blessings. So those who have more are clearly favored by God, whereas those who have less, the poor, clearly are not in God's favor.

But Jesus once again shows us another way. He gives us, as I keep saying, a place to stand. "Whatever you do," he says regarding the poor in Matthew 25, "whatever you do with regard to the least of these you do to me." He makes clear repeatedly again and again that God resides with the poor, *not* because the poor are holier than the rich but because unlike the rich, the poor need sustenance; the poor, as children of God, need help.

Now I like to think of an analogy here. If you're a parent of say, one – well, more than one – two, three, four, or five kids, and one of those children is sick, obviously, you're going to devote more of your time to the sick child than you would to the rest of the family. That doesn't mean that you don't love the other children. It just means that *that* child in particular demands your devotion. God is no different. God, as Latin and South American theologians say, has a "preferential option for the poor." That doesn't mean God has an *exclusive* option for them. But God has a preferential option for them because *they need God's help more than we do*.

Next to tempting us to self-indulgent ways, as well as living only for ourselves, American culture, number three, tempts us to neglect God in prayer and worship. Another midweek Lenten confession. Now, some of you heard a sermon I gave a few months ago that was critical of sports. I thought that might be my last Sunday here at Queen Anne Lutheran. It wasn't because I have anything against sports. I watched as the 49ers lost the Super Bowl. It was a terrible experience for me, not because of the company, they were great, but I couldn't believe the 49ers and how they lost a game they should have won.

So, it's not that I have a problem with sports as such. It's because on Sunday morning, the heart of America beats, not for Christ in the sanctuary, but for its team in the Coliseum. America, in other words, has an idolatrous obsession with sports. I remember being at what used to be Group Health Hospital up on Capitol Hill, and there was a display with pictures of a man who was so devoted to the Seahawks that he had himself buried in Seahawk flags, in a jersey. That is beyond love of sports. That is an obsession. When I'm buried, I want to be buried with the cross. That is my faith.

The worst part of all this is that some of us joke about it. "Oh Pastor, I won't be in church next Sunday because the game's on, ha ha." As if I'm supposed to laugh at that. I mean, what's funny about neglecting God for one lousy hour a week? You think God laughs at that, when you make that kind of joke? This is clearly a trigger for me. Because it suggests to me that we're valuing something more than why we're here. Do we not remember the first commandment, that "You shall have no other gods before God?" Our idolatrous obsession with sports, especially places Christian parents, trying to raise their children in the faith, in a bad position. Why? Because culture forces them to choose between sports activities and church activities; between Sunday morning practice and Sunday morning worship.

I don't know about you, but this was never a problem when I was a kid, to have practice or games scheduled for Sunday morning would have been *unthinkable*. Now, however, things are different. The values of our culture have changed. Our bondage to sports in America distracts us from what should matter most in our lives, namely, God.

So there you have it. Three ways American culture that is the culture in which we live, tempt us to worship a triad of lesser gods. The "God of the Belly," as in self-indulgence. The God of the Self as in "living only for self" and the God of Entertainment, which at worst distracts us from what matters, or should matter most, in our lives.

But Christ, as I've said, gives us a place to stand, a vantage point from which to recognize the idolatry and obsession in our culture, and to do something about it. He calls us, in the words of Paul, to freedom; freedom from the various gods of American culture, the various forms of bondage that demand our ultimate allegiance, so that we can live free *for* others and for God, and experience true satisfaction in the process.

Now, obviously, and I'm going to repeat this, because I don't want you to mis-hear me, *food* is not bad. Self-indulgence is bad. Obviously, caring for ourselves, as we heard yesterday at Lenten Breakfast, caring for ourselves is not bad, but living *only* for ourselves is a problem. And obviously – and I say this to our star basketball player, Phoebe, who's sitting in the pews – sports are not bad.

But Satan, who personifies the power of temptation, can turn each of these good things into addictions and obsessions, or what St. Ignatius, the founder of the Jesuit order in Roman Catholicism calls “disordered attachments.”

May we, in turn, follow the example of Christ, who gives us a place to stand in contrast with these cultural values, enabling us to recognize temptation in our lives, and empowering us to retain our focus in the midst of them, on what truly matters most: the God above all gods, the God of Jesus Christ.

In His name, we pray.

Amen.