

Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

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Now, it is the season of Lent. With Ash Wednesday, we dispense with all pretense, all our conceit; we confessed that we are nothing, we can do nothing, and we are destined for nothing.

With ashes placed on your forehead you placed upon yourself your own death sentence: *“Thou art dust, oh Man, and to dust thou shalt return.”* Think deeply upon this; meditate on the weakness of your flesh, the helplessness of your will.

Cast away from your mind any secular, worldly notion of ‘loving yourself,’ of ‘self-confidence’ and ‘being strong and independent.’ Bury any idea of ‘self-esteem’ or ‘self-actualization.’ For your self is mortal, it is ash, and to ash it shall return. Know that you are utterly defenseless, against the devil, against the travails of this life, and perhaps most notably, against yourself.

Look upon your own mortality, and despair of all your efforts to give meaning and purpose and pleasure to your life. Look inward, and see the writhing abyss, the senseless nothing which dwells therein. *‘Vanity, vanity, all is vanity.’*

Then draw your gaze up from the vanity and emptiness inside you; and look up outside yourself to the face of Jesus, Our Lord, our champion. See the mercy in his eyes, and the command of his lips, the compassion, mixed with authority in his countenance. And in your soul, pray to him the only prayer that ‘*a broken and contrite heart*’ can utter: *“Arise O Lord, Save me, O my God.”*

For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

Join the patriarchs and saints; join all Israel in the wilderness, join the Church everywhere in crying out to God with these words. And hear the one word he speaks in reply to our supplication: "Yes." John writes that Jesus is 'The Word.' And much has been written on what this might mean. Is it a reference to the Torah? Is it a reference to the divine speech within God? Is it a reference to the word of God's sacred name? All of these may have their validity, but today perhaps it is enough to think that the one Word, who is Jesus, is the word 'Yes.' God's 'yes' to our broken prayer, Christ's 'yes' to will of his Father.

The Holy Spirit fills our Lord, and commands him to go into the wilderness, to face our ancient enemy, the murderer of our race. The Temptation of Our Lord has begun.

Within his mind, within his heart, the devil tortured Our Lord's soul. At every turn, Satan seeks to destroy the oneness of Christ's heart and will, his utter devotion to mankind and to his Father in heaven; he seeks to sow the seed of selfishness, even in such small ways.

The devil said to him, *"If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread."* For in ancient times, just as once God lovingly preserve his people in the wilderness by raining down on them heavenly bread, so too must the Son of God feed himself and his people; so too must the Messiah institute a feast, a supper. And Satan does not contradict this holy task; rather he makes an insidious, a suggestion. "If you are the Son of God, you must feed your people and sustain them, therefore, take these stones, and make them bread by the mere utterance of your word." This is the Supper of Satan, a supper of bread only, without wine. A Eucharist of body only, without the shedding of blood. "Feed your people, Jesus, but it is unnecessary that you feed them with your rent and torn body, and your shed blood. Forgo all the pain and suffering the Father has destined for you, and feed them here with bread born of rock."

But it is written, *"Man shall not live by bread alone."* Indeed, man shall live by the Word of God, the utter and complete assent to the will of the Father, the "yes" given in response to God's

path; a path which must lead to Passion and agony and cross, to the shedding of blood, that the New Man might live not *'by bread alone,'* but bread and wine, body and blood.

The devil seeks to pervert our Lord's spirit yet again. He shows to Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, and tells him: *"If you, then, will but respect me, it will all be yours."* He is not merely trying to bribe Jesus with worldly power in exchange for submission. For Christ has indeed come to claim the world and all its kingdoms, he has come to receive the inheritance due him as the Son of God, just as it is written: *"Thou art my son, this day have I begotten thee; ask of me, and I will give thee the nations for thine inheritance, and the ends of the earth for thy possession. Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron, thou shalt dash them to pieces like a potters vessel."* Again, what the devil offers is the completion of Jesus' divine mission, though by different means, by means which do not require suffering and passion, but rather, glory.

But Christ responds: *"You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve."* It is as if he says: "No Satan, I will obtain my kingdom, I will have my inheritance, and I shall receive it as my Father wills to give it to me, even if in blood and torment. In humility, and silence."

Finally Satan seems to surrender: "Son of God, now call down your angels, and take the world, do not bruise your heel to crush my head, I will surrender and leave, and your heel will only strike rock; you can have what is yours without a fight."

Now the will of the Father seems meaningless, or worse, disordered. If there is no need for suffering, why suffer? If there is no enemy, why fight? If Satan has already surrendered, why conquer? This is the last temptation Our Lord faces in the wilderness, a call to apostasy, a call to no longer say 'Yes' to God, but 'why?'

Great is the Love of our Lord, that he went through such anguish, such tortures in his mind. The Love that asks no question, but obeys, even unto death.

But the devil is defeated, and Our Lord

conquers, when he rebukes the devil, finally and perhaps fatally. *"You shall not put the Lord your God to the test."* Here our Lord confesses the perfection of his faith, he confesses that which every creature owes to his creator, the confession that God is God, and his will is Law. Jesus shows forth the faith of Abraham, who believed that God would give him a son in his old age even as God commands him to kill the son of his old age.

The devil is put to flight by our Lord's complete obedience to the will of God, even when that will seems absurd. It is written: *"And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Jesus until an opportune time."*

"An opportune time." The devil is not defeated yet, for though he has failed to tempt Christ to forsake his divine mission with words, he will soon tempt him with whips and nails and thorns. He merely awaits the opportune time.

But remember that this 'opportune time' of the devil is synonymous with our Lord's 'hour.' The hour of his glorious exaltation found within the humiliation of his Passion.

This season of Lent, we, who are but dust, fix our eyes upon our only hope, Jesus, the Christ, as he sets his face like a flint to Jerusalem, to Mount Zion, to the cross. The devil attacked Jesus in the wilderness, and was defeated; now Jesus goes to Jerusalem to attack the devil. He seeks to enter the strong man's house; he is determined to do battle with the strong man face to face on our behalf. And like David before Goliath, Jesus will face him without armor, but naked and clothed in human weakness. But by his voluntary death, Jesus will descend into the very heart of Satan's power, and he will face the devil as the True Son of Man, there to plunder the strong man's house, there to bind Satan and to abolish his fiercest weapon, that is, death, through the glory of his Resurrection.

See Christ high on the cross, the entire earth beneath him, and see that our ancient prayer has been answered:

"Arise, O Lord; and destroy thine enemies, and make all the world thy footstool."

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Deuteronomy

26:1-11; Romans 10:8-13; Luke 4:1-13.