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Lent 1 Series A 2017

Phillip L. Brandt
Concordia University - Portland, pbrandt@cu-portland.edu

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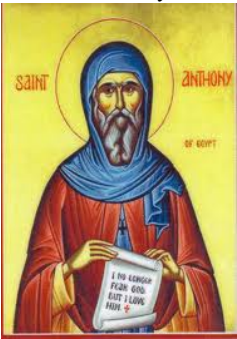
First Sunday in Lent, March 5

The Lententide is upon us. This is the season of our sorrow and penitence as we prepare for the feast of the Resurrection and the joy of Easter. As we discussed with Advent this runs counter to our culture, which understands neither penitence nor embraced sorrow. We do not do penitence in 21st century America. If we have done something really wrong, we are apt to get on a daytime talk show. It might even get us a gig on late night with Dave Letterman or Jay Leno. Our sins may be a windfall. In fact, the only time we ever see the word “sin” outside of Church is on the dessert menu at our favorite restaurant. Is that chocolate fudge brownie “sinfully rich?” If it is, are we more or less inclined to order it?



We don't engage in embraced sorrow either. Sadness is a disease that really ought to be treated pharmaceutically. This is why we have Prozac and Zoloft, is it not? No one should be sad, at least not for a while. Sadness is diagnosable, and treatable. We have conquered sadness, or at least the culture would have us think so.

All this is in stark contrast to the prior generations of Church and especially the generations who were worshiping and serving when the general themes of the season and the readings were being established. The early church had its ascetics, men who lived on a pole or who mortified the flesh by becoming a hermit in the deserts or the moors. They were the heroes of the Christians of their day, in much the same way our Olympic medalists are the heroes today. It was not the Rick Warren types who were lauded, but St. Anthony the Anchorite and St. Simeon and St. Daniel the Stylites. They say Daniel's beard was over 5 feet long when he died on his pole and his legs cracked when they tried to straighten him out. He had lived on a tiny platform for over 25 years. The Emperor of Rome would come and consult with Simeon on his pole. In days when the plague stalked Europe or wars were frequent, when hunger was ever present and life was fragile and often short, people could not hide behind the deception that they were basically OK. The most common motif of the years leading up to the Reformation was the “Dance of Death” in which the skeletal grim reaper led processions of people from every walk of life to the great equalizer – the grave.



This has had an odd distorting effect upon the readings and how they are heard today. The people of the prior centuries when the roots of these pericopes were developed were in sort of a perpetual state of penitence, especially the poor and the religiously zealous. The season of Lent was embraced by them and seen as a way that their zeal and situation could be recognized by the Church and given a place in the liturgical calendar. They liked Lent, it articulated what they were feeling. Sometimes they could go a little overboard on their Lenten fasting and observance. The fathers who chose the readings for Sundays did so in a deliberate attempt to

soften this piety. Sunday was supposed to be a day when the rigors of too much Lent were relaxed. The other six days of the week were occasions for greater repentance. They understood that Sunday always was a day of the Gospel. Lent was relaxed on Sundays.

We find ourselves in a situation where the average man walking through the door has not thought much about repentance all week. We would very much like him to. We think it is important for his celebration of Easter. But the texts delivered to us for this occasion were not designed to increase his repentance, but to soften his penitential rigor.

So what is the preacher to do in this time? This is perhaps most graphic on the first Sunday in Lent as we are given to see Jesus besting Satan in the temptation. This is not a reading designed to make us feel badly, it is a reading designed to give hope to the man who feels terrible. But our people do not feel the weight of their sins. We have an entire funeral home industry devoted to shielding us from the realities of death. It is not that fewer people are dying today, but who among us has had to prepare a loved one's body for burial? I am not suggesting that all this is bad. I for one am quite thankful for the pain medications which have made my injuries and minor surgeries more bearable. My medicine cabinet has the usual stock of medicines that stave off a headache and dry up a runny nose. But am I just as invested in the reality-denying world view as I critique?

Or is there whole other set of realities which weigh heavily upon this generation but which are different than those of our fathers? Can the preacher simply translate? Is it possible to substitute recession, growing old, and cholesterol for Luther's sin, death and devil? Is that just buying into the lie or is it being a smart preacher? What do you think?

The last time we discussed this we wondered just what it is that people are feeling that might make them more penitential. People are isolated, alone. They don't have a sense of moral sin – many don't think they have done something terribly wrong, but they are not happy. They are alone despite their social media. We can be in the same room with someone and never talk to each other except to instant message and text one another. People confide that they have no one they can really talk to. Is the Gospel for this generation really a sermon series on prayer? Is the embodied Gospel really the life which is open to the other, putting the smart phone down and paying attention to the person.

We wondered about the role of Lent today. What does it do?

- 1. This is a time of reflection. Time seemed to be the big issue here. Time spent in the word and reflecting on that word.*
- 2. We struggle with denial, but that denial is important for the rhythm of Easter. An Easter without Lenten denial is somehow impoverished. The struggle we have with denial is odd. We are a culture fixated on dieting and we hear exhortations to save money for retirement and other forms of denial. But for some reason Lent struggles to connect to this.*

3. *Fellowship – the Lenten soup supper and less formal service of prayer and devotion on Wednesday night is an important part of our congregation’s fellowship. Some parishes conclude the season with a Seder meal.*
4. *Back to the basics – Lent brings us to the essential elements of our Christianity. Lent focuses us on our sin, our savior, our need, his supply.*

Collect of the Day

O Lord God, You led Your ancient people through the wilderness and brought them to the promised land. Guide the people of your Church that following our Savior we may walk through the wilderness of this world toward the glory of the world to come; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Lent is profitably seen as a journey and this prayer hearkens back to the long memory of God’s people of a day when they wandered through the wilderness on their way to Canaan. In that time they ate only the bread which God gave them, drank from the rock which God caused to give them water. They followed his cloud by day and his fire by night. The waters parted for them, kings were defeated, and great signs and wonders were done. Every Passover meal involved the eldest member of the family telling the story and it always began... ”When we were in Egypt...” not when our fathers were in Egypt but every generation was given to relive that Exodus event, the great salvific act of God in the OT. Every communion service puts Christian people at that cross, in that upper room, at that tomb, not vicariously lived through the stories about the event, but actually present to them. This is the great mystery of worship.

Lent is the journey of God’s people, a journey led by Jesus and involving all who would take up the cross and follow him. What in this world marks it as a wilderness? What will strike your people? Are we today the moralist who rails against the pornography that passes for television programming in our land? Will we take on the evil of regressive taxation otherwise known as the Lottery? Shall we devote our attention to the more physical woes of the planet, the uprisings by desperate people in the Middle East who have labored under the burden of vile dictatorships and the cruel suppression of those uprisings and the failures of new governments? Shall we point to some other unrest among nations, the warming of the polar ice-caps, or the fact that a hungry child cries somewhere right now in my city and I am sitting here warm and dry and so well fed that my doctor tells me to cut back?

They all have been the sermon themes of preachers past and will continue to provide grist for the preaching mill. What truth will we call our people to see? What penitence shall we urge them toward? Which sorrow will prick them and make them think, feel, and repent?

I like the season of Lent. Its simplicity and purity really helps me put all the garbage and complexity of life into its place. This is the season to ask the most important questions of all. These questions are necessary for me to return to again and again. I belong here.

How we define that wilderness of this world will also have much to say about the end of the journey as well. The sermon about the hungry child will find its comfort in the Christ who cares about it and who has equipped us with the means to do something about that child.

What is wilderness for our people?

- 1. Darkness – there are no lights out there.*
- 2. A place of danger – we cannot take care of ourselves. We are vulnerable. This grates on our self-sufficient sensibilities.*
- 3. A place of purification? Perhaps they don't think of this way, but should they? The Bible clearly does.*
- 4. A place of deprivation – heaven is the feast, here we are on short rations, it seems. Manna likely sounded great the first day or two, but forty years of it must have gotten old.*
- 5. A lonely place. Today's hyper-connected world has not resulted in people being more in touch with one another, but it has isolated us. We use our smart-phones to be absent, not to be present for people. Just look around in a restaurant sometime and see all the people whose faces are buried in their phones and not talking to each other.*
- 6. Brokenness – if you run across a city in the wilderness, we image it is in ruins. Wilderness often evokes a place which has been abandoned.*

We pray for God's guidance as we walk that road to Easter's joyful message, as we walk that road to heaven's eternal peace, as we walk that road that Jesus blazed and which God has blessed. The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. Before that, they were known as the followers of the Way.

Readings

Genesis 3:1-21

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made.

He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?"

² And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, ³ but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" ⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. ⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." ⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. ⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

⁸ And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the

garden. ⁹ But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” ¹⁰ And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” ¹¹ He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” ¹² The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” ¹³ Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

¹⁴ The LORD God said to the serpent,

“Because you have done this,
cursed are you above all livestock
and above all beasts of the field;
on your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.

¹⁵ I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel.”

¹⁶ To the woman he said,

“I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children.
Your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you.”

¹⁷ And to Adam he said,

“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife
and have eaten of the tree
of which I commanded you,
‘You shall not eat of it,’
cursed is the ground because of you;
in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;

¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.

¹⁹ By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread,
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
for you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.”

²⁰ The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. ²¹ And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.

Here is where it all starts. This is the root of the problem. The Lenten season will have us address the very roots of our deepest and darkest problems; it will not be satisfied with the band-aid solution to anything. The evils of hunger, disease, and death will not be solved by social programs, medicine, and better health. They are but temporary solutions, crutches which enable us to lurch forward for another day. The real solution only happens when we address what happened in this garden long ago. Satan is wrapped up with our biggest problems and has been from the beginning. Any real victory over our problems will have to involve his defeat.

Adam and Eve, the only genuinely spiritually capable people who ever lived before Jesus were not up to the task, or perhaps we should say, they succumbed. They were up to the task of resisting him, they just did not do it. Ever since their fall we have all been losers to him, spiritual cripples who cannot walk the straight and narrow road. Our palsied limbs and broken bodies just cannot do it. Only one of us has managed it and our hopes are all pinned on him.

There is much to be made of this little story told in Genesis. The nature of obedience was such that a world without any possibility to sin would have rendered the obedience of Adam and Eve meaningless, so one tree, out of the many, was forbidden. It was one tree. How often do we feel just the opposite, that there are so many wrong things to choose, and there is only one right one, only one healthy one. This applies not only to the moral sphere. What can we eat or drink anymore that is not a carcinogen or which causes heart disease. (I was particularly pleased the other day to read that coffee was actually called good for you on several accounts – it helps prevent certain kinds of diabetes! Of course it also gives you cancer, but at least you will be able to eat cake while you are undergoing chemo and then promptly vomit.)

The sin of Adam and Eve has ruptured the relationship with God. He used to walk with them in the garden, in the cool part of the day. But now they hide from him. They are afraid where fear had been unknown. This knowledge of Good and Evil is not a beneficial thing, it has warped every part of their lives. I liken it to the knowledge of narcotics. I know what narcotics are. I know what they do to a person on one level, but the cocaine addict “knows” his drug in a way I do not want to know. That sort of knowledge is not beneficial. Likewise, I am sure Adam and Eve had some idea about Good and Evil prior to their sin. But when they sinned, they knew evil thus something about good as well, which they had not perhaps known in the same way.

But God calls for them. He could have simply destroyed them. He knows exactly what they have done, there is no need on God's part for the interrogation that follows. He knows what they have done and just which bush they are hiding behind. God wants to hear it from them. He wants his creatures to admit their sin, for he would forgive it. So he seeks them out, not to punish but to love them.

In a very real sense the man hiding behind the bush, trying to put something between himself and God is not living his real self. Paul says that we were dead in our sins. Yes, Adam and Eve were still biologically living, but cut off from God, we are all dead. This life we now call faith. This is stepping out from behind the bush. We repent – own up to what we have done. And God amazingly still loves us. He makes the skins into garments for them. The consequences of their actions remain, but God’s love is not removed from them. He still cares for them. This is now our life, a life which looks forward to the day when the angel with the flaming sword steps aside and we re-enter this garden. But even right now, it is a real life, in which we, for all our faults, stand in the presence of a holy God and are not destroyed but he bends his ears to our prayers and cares for us still.

God acknowledges the warping of human nature. The woman will bear children in pain and her need will be for a husband and too often his greater strength will mean her suffering. He will be the stronger and use his strength to his advantage. This is why we have many more shelters and programs for battered wives than we do for husbands. It is simply a fact of life. Because of testosterone, men are stronger and women too often bear the proof of that strength in their bruised and battered bodies. We also need to acknowledge that in much of the world this continues to be true in ways we seem to have forgotten. The woman in most of the world simply cannot imagine a life without a husband in the way that a young woman in the industrialized nations can. She needs a husband or her life will be very tragic indeed. Her only hope for what anyone would call a good life depends on a husband.

The man, on the other hand, is cursed to till a soil that is better suited to weeds and thistles. He will fall exhausted into bed at night. His life will be spent working so hard to afford the things he wants to do that he no longer wants them anymore. If he takes the time off to enjoy them, he cannot afford them. It is a catch 22 from which even the wealthy are often not able to free themselves. His disordered desires will enslave him to the constant need for more.

Of course, even the super-wealthy are not able to elude the last lines of God’s dreadful description of the post-fall world. To dust the man shall return. He shall die.

Thus Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden, but not before God shows his gentleness one more time. He makes skins for them. They had hidden their nakedness with fig leaves. Moses probably says this because the leaf of a fig tree is almost sexual in its shape, but if you have ever touched one you also know that they are about as rough as sand paper. God cares about the little abrasions of life too.

Of course, God has already in mind the solution. The painful bearing of children will also be the bearing of salvation. A child born in the blood, pain, and fear of a young woman who labors in the unhygienic and humble confines of a stable will be the one who undoes Satan’s power. His head will be crushed at the considerable cost of a bruised heel, but Satan’s power will not always hold the field. Satan can be conquered, he will be conquered, and he has been conquered

in the one child of Adam and Eve who did not succumb to his wiles, who resisted temptation at every turn.

Three years ago we were struck that at the end of the reading God covered them. Was this the first death? Some animal had to die in order that the humans would be “covered.” We thought that reminded us of God clothing us in righteousness. Is there a foreshadowing of the passion of Christ here?

Psalm 32:1-7

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.

² Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

³ For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah

⁵ I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,”
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah

⁶ Therefore let everyone who is godly
offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found;
surely in the rush of great waters,
they shall not reach him.

⁷ You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with shouts of deliverance. Selah

⁸ *I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.*

⁹ *Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
which must be curbed with bit and bridle,
or it will not stay near you.*

¹⁰ *Many are the sorrows of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD.*

¹¹ *Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!*

Again, the psalm is read profitably as the description of the person who has heard and believed the readings and the sermon today. Blessed is the man whose sins are covered and forgiven by God. Our refusal to repent has not brought us innocence but anguish. God beautiful love has healed even my deepest and darkest sins.

Read this slowly and ask what every word means. It is a beautiful psalm and it deserves our attention. God will bless you through it.

Romans 5:12-19

¹²Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned— ¹³for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. ¹⁴Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.

¹⁵But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. ¹⁶And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. ¹⁷For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

¹⁸Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. ¹⁹For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. ²⁰Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, ²¹so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul's words here make a critical connection for us. Genesis and Matthew speak of Christ's victory over Satan and the fact that we were under Satan's authority, but most of the folks to whom I have preached don't really see themselves as under Satan's authority. They hear that Satan reigns and they imagine that they are autonomous, and even if they labor under the authority of some boss, they look forward to retirement when they no longer have to answer to anyone.

But Paul won't let us have that. He brings up the ugly truth of Satan's authority: Satan kills us. He hates God's creation and slowly, inexorably destroys that creation. He brings us to a grave. This makes the authority question very existentially real. The mortality rate for human beings is pretty high! And now the authority of Christ, the victory of Christ makes a lot more sense – he who believes in me shall not die, says Jesus. That's powerfully good news.

Paul proclaims the in-breaking of the kingdom of God in cosmic terms. Jesus is to us in terms of righteousness just as Adam is to us in terms of sin, in fact, the second Adam is greater, he has bequeathed the righteousness which was lost in that fall so long ago.

A little help from the philosophers can make more sense of this. Paul is reflecting some Greek philosophical thought which was common in Jewish theology. He is using some terms in more than one way here. He has a cosmic force, known as Death, which results in our dying. Death, the cosmic force which has enslaved us, actually follows upon another cosmic force: Sin, which also results in us doing wrong things which we call sins. When Paul suggests that Jesus has conquered these two, Sin and Death, he is really talking about these cosmic forces, these kingdoms into which we have been enslaved and enthralled. Since Adam's transgression, Sin and Death "reigned" here he is talking about these cosmic forces. Thus, since Sin and Death have been conquered, the dying and the sins which remain as part of our lives are not final, and they are no longer the real truth about it. But they are still there and they still are a problem. Paul will exhort his hearers to live and act in the truth of Sin and Death's defeat, not as though they are still enslaved to these deposed masters.

In the first paragraph of this passage, he is saying that sin has come into the world, the cosmic force was there, even before the ten commandments were given. Even before you could be accused of breaking the Mosaic Law you were still enslaved to the Sin principle. Even if the rules had not been given to you that way.

In a really interesting comparison, he lays the two men, Adam and Jesus, side by side. We have inherited a bitter legacy from our first father. It applies to all humanity and is finally expressed in the death we all die. This is contrary to the will of God. He does not want any to die. Adam was not made to die, and we were not supposed to either.

But Christ's great work has also left a legacy far greater than that bitter legacy of Adam. By him a new righteousness has come and from that righteousness the life which we lack flows. For Paul this is not just a future reality we call heaven, it is a present reality. Like any preacher of morals, he has the notion that you can actually do better than you are doing. In fact, because we are citizens of that holy kingdom of God, because our old masters have been deposed, we are given the power and gift to do perfect things. This is not just some pipe dream for Paul. He believes that Christ's righteousness also is seen in the lives of Christians. Don't get me wrong here or Paul. He also understands the struggles we face. Chapter 7 still looms in this book with its struggle between the old and the new man, but here he speaks of a real righteousness given, not merely some sham in which God calls it good even though we all know that we are miserable sinners. This is God giving us righteousness, the same creator who said "let there be... and there was" is speaking here.

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ And the tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴ But he answered, “It is written,

“Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple ⁶ and said 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,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.”

⁷ Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. ⁹ And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written,

“You shall worship the Lord your God
and him only shall you serve.”

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

Jesus prevails over Satan. The score isn't really close. This is the headline of this text. I have heard it preached as a manual on how to resist temptation, and it works that way, but I believe that fundamentally misses this point, and certainly misses the energy for that life of resisting the tempter. This is not a story about what I am supposed to do or how I should do it. This story is about my victor, my hero, my champion encountering the great foe and prevailing.

Of course, we don't think much about a personal enemy named Satan anymore. He is usually relegated to a red suit with horns and a spiked tail. We fear other demons of our own manufacture and naming but we do not really fear a personal evil with a name and will. Satan may have changed his methods in the post-enlightenment era, but he has not changed his goals. The right thing done for the wrong reason or the wrong thing done for the right reason all serve his ends. His terrors and temptations are just as real today as they ever have been.

Unfortunately, we don't put up much of a fight. We are tempted to think that Jesus had it easy. He was after all the Son of God; that probably meant he had some super-human strength to draw upon. But wait a moment. Philippians said he set that aside and the whole point of the cross is that he ran the human race to its gasping and rattling end. He faced this diabolical foe as a man, a real man with all the frailty that entails.

It is we who do not know the power of Satan very well. He never has to use it on us. We cave in so quickly. Our resistance is at best a feeble protest. Christ knows the full power of Satan. The evil one took his best shot at Jesus and failed. He called in the heaviest artillery, and Jesus did not flinch and his resolve did not bend. Satan did not hold back, he let him have it all. He failed. Jesus won that day in the dry deserts of Palestine. The tempter who had conquered every human being who had ever lived had met his match and more. We are undone, but Jesus was not. And because he won that victory that day, our victory is assured.

This is a hero story. Jesus has gone to battle on our behalf and conquered our foe. It should look a little like David and Goliath to us. This means that now when the tempter makes his appearance, and he does, we can send him packing with Christ's potent victory. As Luther wrote, "one little word can fell him." But do we? That is another question which Lent will explore, but today we are empowered.

The temptation itself is an interesting story. Notice how Satan tempts Jesus, his methods don't really change that much. First he attacks the weakness. Jesus is hungry, so Satan offers him bread. Then he turns around and goes for the pride issue. Shouldn't everyone see this? Demonstrate your holiness by floating down from the pinnacle of the temple, before the eyes of all the faithful. Then they will listen to you. But at the heart of this is a self-centeredness that Jesus rejects. This is not about him, but is about his Father's act of mercy to a sinful creation. Lastly Satan turns the strength of Jesus' faith and his willingness to sacrifice his own needs into another temptation. You could rule the nations of the earth. Think of all the good you could do, think of all the wise decisions that you alone could make. Think of the kingdom you could establish. But Jesus is not after that sort of solution either. The ends do not justify the means.

Satan flees. Jesus has won. This is the reason we were talking about the sins which burden us earlier. Most of us don't really personify Satan, we live in a world without a "Satan" we can easily identify, but that does not mean he is actually gone. We will need to address the effects of Satan, name them as his handiwork, but address the things which happen to us as a result. That would be the loneliness, the sorrow, the depression and the rest of it.

Four approaches to preaching this thing:

- 1. A manual for resisting temptation – Does this tell us how to resist the Devil's wiles?*
- 2. A program for what the Christian can expect. This is how the Devil tempts us.*
- 3. A witness to the fact that Jesus has conquered our enemy. He is the fulfillment of the Genesis 3 promise of a descendant to Adam and Eve who would break Satan's power.*
- 4. A promise – Jesus has also been tempted, he knows our plight and our weakness. He is sympathetic to our prayer and offer us his help to conquer this enemy against whom he has personally struggled and groaned as he was himself tempted.*

1. We are weak before the onslaught of the Devil. Our first parents, the only ones who really had the spiritual capacity to say no, did not, and now we are left with the darkness and the ineptitude of sinful nature. Like a bent arrow, we just cannot fly the straight path. Like a broken television, we will not produce the clear image. Like a computer with a virus, we run spiritually slow and do malicious things.
2. We have a real and personal enemy, someone who is stronger and craftier than we are. He does not wish us well; although, he does his most dastardly work when he masquerades as our friend. He is the father of lies and the accuser who torments us.
3. Our world, however, laughs at the idea of Satan. The red suit, the horns, the pointy tail are not the reality. For many people the idea that there is a personal evil is laughable, so the world is our enemy in this too. It distracts us from the game, laughs at our acts of piety and self-discipline.
4. Our own sinful nature is no friend here either. The brokenness we mentioned above is only half the story. We ourselves also delight in our sin, we are not merely the passive objects in all this, but active participants, members of the other team. In Paul's language in Romans, we are enslaved, enthralled by the power and rule of Sin and Satan.
5. Of course, all this has dire consequences, consequences which ought to terrify us into repentance. Death is a fearsome foe, but there are many other consequences of our sin. Yet we are told they are normal, the circle of life, the way it is supposed to be. Life is supposed to have these little bumps. There is even a philosophy that suggests that without the struggle of life we will become weak and listless. Perhaps that is true for us as we are, but is the way we are the way we are supposed to be?
6. Even Christ's victory, though, can sound like a terrible indictment. A simple review of my own life cannot but be discouraging in terms of my resisting sin. I have suffered defeat within the very triumphal arch of victory. Christ has won, but I have lost.

Gospel

1. Christ has won the victory over Satan in the deserts of Palestine, the wilderness of the world. Satan has not got a perfect track record with humanity. One of us has prevailed, and in that victory is a victory for us all.
2. Satan's power, his real power, has been tested and it has failed the test. It took what it thought was another victim and in the victim found its conqueror. When he comes to us now in all his terror, we know something he fears, the name of Christ.
3. Christ has made room for us in his kingdom, the victory he won in the desert comes right after his baptism, where he took to himself the sins of the whole world and

repented of all them, even the ones you have done. He knows them, he is aware of our sinfulness, but he is not dismayed. He came to raise the dead, heal the sick, save the sinner, and beat the devil before whom we were powerless.

4. This gift of righteousness, this deed done by Jesus means that we are given the chance, the next time that temptation rolls around, to say no to him. We are citizens of a different kingdom, the chains of our bondage have been broken. We can still act like a slave, it is true, but we don't have to. Christ has empowered real and effective change in the lives of people. I bet we have experienced that ourselves and certainly we have seen it in others. This Jesus event changes the lives of real people.

Sermon Theme:

1. Christ my Hero (Gospel Lesson: That the Spirit of God move the hearer to confess that Jesus is my champion, my hero, who has conquered my greatest enemy)

This sermon begins with the simple premise that I am powerless before my foe. My situation was dire and bleak. This may take more development than it should, but our culture fundamentally has a problem with this. As a member of the human race I was without real hope against an implacable foe who sought quite literally to devour me. The ancients had a ready personal evil named Satan of whom they were afraid. But we have banished Satan to the joke and a Halloween costume. But there are plenty of foes out there who want to devour me, not the least of which is death, but many more.

I am thinking that any number of movies which have this as a theme – Superman, Alien, Independence Day, zombie movies, etc., might be of help here. They often have a heroic character who rises up and defeats the implacable foe on behalf of a beleaguered and suffering humanity.

The assertion of the sermon simply is that Jesus is that hero and more. You might want to bring up the faith of the ancients who really often thought of Jesus as an athletic champion, who bested Satan for us. You might also want to bring up the idea of a champion who fights on behalf of the army. The David and Goliath story is one of those stories. The basic premise of the fight was that the champion who won the single combat was also winning on behalf of all the people behind him.

Now, Christ has won the day. The foe still roars and thrashes about, but, his end is assured and my victory has been won. He will not lay claim to me on that last day. I belong to Christ.

2. Christ my Life (Gospel/Epistle Lesson: That the hearer would confess that Christ is my life and take the life steps demanded by this truth.)

I was once lost and blighted by sin, it had such a grip on me that I could not free myself. Christ has come and done this, and now I am freed from the serpent's coils. I may indeed live a life empowered by Christ. The words I speak, the deeds I do, the love I express all may find their source and their end in Him. It is a whole world over which Satan has no say. I no longer see this world and my life as a failure, but I am a success in Christ. This sermon lets us recast our whole existence. This new definition of our lives flows right out of Jesus' victory over Satan.

Paul says in Galatians 2:20 that Christ lives in me. It is no longer I who live, but he lives in me, and that makes my whole life different.

The Collect spoke of living in a wilderness and God's guidance of his people through that wilderness. This sermon really counts on his guidance, and trusts his promise to be that guide. He has things under his control. This is who you are.

This sermon will use the construction of Paul's letter to the Romans but understand that the temptation scene in the Gospel is the thing about which Paul is speaking, not only the cross event. Don't get me wrong here, the temptation scene is empowered by the cross, but it is clearly showing a victory over Satan, Sin, and Death, the cosmic forces which have enslaved us and which ruled between the Adam and Jesus. We noticed that the temptation words were actually repeated at the point of Jesus on the cross. "if he is really the son of God, let him come down..."

Now, Jesus has conquered my foe, but will I really be freed and still walk around with the unlocked shackles still encumbering my feet and hands? Or shall I not cast them aside and live freely as he has declared. This is both a powerful gospel and law statement, so be careful here. Many will hear this and immediately realize that they have not done this and be cast into some sort of questioning about whether their shackles have really been released. You will need to go through this more than once with them.

One way to talk about Lenten repentance is to talk about a life which is transformed. I have not lived this life as I ought, that means today, this day, I resolve to live it differently. This is repentance. It is not just thinking about my sins, but it is also doing something about that.

But do not despair. Jesus repeated himself more than once with the disciples for our benefit. Indeed, this temptation scene is really a fore-echo of sorts of the great battle for this world which transpired on Golgatha.

This sermon really wants the folks who hear it to own the victory which Jesus won today and to see that Christ has empowered them to live differently on this account. In this sense, this Lenten sermon is about amending the sinful life with the power of Christ and his Spirit behind you.

3. Christ the Hero of My Life (Gospel and Epistle: That the Spirit of God would move the hearer to embrace Christ's pattern and life as his/her own.)

This sermon is similar to the prior sermon, but it takes the theme in a slightly different way. Just as our heroes often define who we are, Jesus also defines who I am. Jesus suffers for us, he endures hunger, pain, even death. He did not need to do that to best the Devil. He had the power to annihilate the Devil in an instant. But that is not what he chose to do, because his love drove him to save the people whom the Devil had enslaved in that garden so long ago.

I used to conform to the pattern of this world, by success which I defined. By nature I was a thrall of Satan, I knew nothing else. My life was lived for me, my universe had but one center, and I was it. But now Christ has come into my life and liberated me from that bondage and raised me to a new sort of life. [He has moved into the center of my life, pushing me out of that spot, and placing me into his orbit.](#) This life bears an increasing resemblance to Him. Immersed in the Word of God, I find it an effective tool against the wiles of Satan. Inspired by his humble service, I will not lord it over people and succumb to the temptation of power. Here the preacher may want to go to that list of consequences in Genesis 3. Filled with his life, I no longer live life for myself and my own needs, but am freed from self-centeredness and liberated to God centeredness.

4. [Jesus was tempted too \(That the hearer would take comfort from the truth that Jesus also has born temptation for us.\)](#)

[Jesus did not need to be tempted to beat Satan. He had the power simply to squash him. But he doesn't do that. He undergoes a temptation, a real temptation, not a sham or fake temptation. His humiliation, his birth in a stable, childhood, and whole life is not just a show, but it is telling us something very important. He has become one of us, one with us, so that our faltering hearts and lives may find hope and peace and encouragement in him. He has been tempted. When I am tempted, I am therefore never alone. I don't have to be strong when I am no longer able to be strong. I can lean on him. I don't have to be crafty and wise, I can trust that he has walked this road long before me. When I stumble, his loving hands pick me up. He knows how easy it is to fail. He was tempted too. There is never a moment so dark that his light cannot shine there. There is no suffering which has not been redeemed by his suffering. There is no loneliness which is so absolute that he does not hear my prayers and make himself present for me.](#)

[We might want to work on the wilderness theme under the collect for this.](#)

[This means some very tangible things for me today. I will be tempted to sin when I walk out these doors. That is a heritage I have inherited from Adam and Eve, the two](#)

first parents whose story is told in the first reading. I will face a terrible foe who has power and trickery which I cannot imagine nor, by myself, have I any hope to defeat. But I will walk out those doors joyful, confident, and sure. Jesus has beaten him and his victory is mine. I may personally fail, indeed, it is most likely that I will. But Jesus has still given me his victory.

But Jesus' victory also gives me more. I am no match for the Devil, it is true, but he was and he is, and he lives in me. Jesus' temptation and whole life of suffering, pain, even death, means that there is no road I can walk which takes me past his presence and help. I do not face that foe alone. Jesus is there. Relying on him, trusting in him, I am much more than a match for Satan. I am wielding the very power of heaven. The gates of hell cannot prevail against the kingdom of Christ and the Church he has established. We crash those gates and despoil our foe, snatching people from his clutches through words of forgiveness and love.

The day will come when the consequences of sin, the death of which Paul speaks, will chain me. I will die, we all know that. And Satan would have us see that day and think that we have lost. He has won. But Jesus speaks another word to us. He has not only been tempted, he has been killed. And he has broken death's power. I will one day walk through that grim portal of death. But I will not lose hope or despair. Christ is even there, he has worked his authority in that place too. Satan has lost everything. I shall live.