

The holy gospel according to Luke in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter... **Glory to you, O Lord**

**Brothers and Sisters, Grace to you and peace, from God our Father  
and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen...**

You gotta hand it to the devil... He's one shady and persistent guy! And he's a salesman, "look what I got right here, just what you want!" I bet he could even sell snow to Minnesotans... Right?

I heard a new saying this week: When you try to fight the Devil, you wind up doing the Devil's work. That's the paradox and problem with evil. The more certain we are about the difference between good and evil, the more vulnerable we become to engaging in evil.

Lent began last Wednesday, and lasts for 40 days, excluding Sundays. And today is the first Sunday in Lent. It's a time of examination, reflection, a time of taking a long look in the mirror... In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus in the wilderness being tempted by the Devil.

Temptation itself seems like an important subject, especially in the context of Lent. But truthfully, temptation is a symptom of a much deeper kind of human sickness, a sickness so pervasive that it's not only hard for us to perceive, it's embarrassing to admit. Knowing right and wrong is one thing, doing right instead of wrong is another...

Quick story... When I was a very young boy, I can't even remember the age, but I sure remember the incident... Our family joined a couple other families for a church activity. On the way there, my mom gave us a huge lecture about how to play nice, how to be respectful and polite. My mom was pretty good at laying down the law...

My best friend Dan was there. We were neighbors, just two farm kids, always rode the bus together, sometimes we were a little bit of a handful. The third family had a boy who was a couple years younger than us; I'll call him Tim, he attended our school. He had a little bit of a learning disability; some of the other kids at school picked on him, bullied him.

I remember the family's home had a big play room with a huge braided rug in the middle. Dan and I found the cars and tractors, and in no time at all we were doing what all kids do with cars on a braided rug. Right? Every braided rug is a race track!

We gave Tim the job of starting the races. Dan and I were whipping those cars and tractors around that rug as fast as we could; getting a little more careless and competitive all the time. Tim was getting a little excited, he was on his hands and knees on a corner of the rug, yelling and laughing.

And I still remember so clearly, I had this tractor, and I just whipped it around the corner and right over his fingers. He immediately started crying and hollering. Of course, all the parents came running... I remember the horror on my mom's face when she surmised what happened.

My mom never said a thing, and I knew she was disappointed. Believe me, that's the worst punishment of all-- Suffering the disappointment of your parents...

I felt ashamed, I immediately left the house and went to sit in the car. And I stayed there... I knew exactly what was expected, what was right and wrong and I did the wrong thing.

Adam and Eve are tempted by the serpent to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil... They knew the difference between right and wrong, and they knew they did the wrong thing. They were ashamed, they knew they were naked, they tried to hide and cover themselves. This is the deep sickness we all live with.

Knowing good and evil is one thing, doing good and not evil is another... The sickness is in the thinking they are the same. That knowing good and evil is the same as doing good and not evil. This sickness is nothing short of thinking we are like God.

In fact, this sickness seems particularly pernicious among us religious folks. For some reason we seem to believe we are divinely ordained to tell others how we are like God and what God thinks about others. So, when you try to fight the Devil, you wind up doing the Devil's work.

As the Apostle Paul puts it "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." This is why we confess that we are in bondage to sin. And why only God can rescue us. There is truth and humility in confessing our bondage to sin.

My older brother is a Psychologist who works at Hazelten. He specializes in working with teenagers and addictions. We're close, and we've done a few motorcycle trips out to Sturgis. We always have a lot to talk about. He loves to talk with me about the spirituality in his work.

According to him, one of the hardest things for an alcoholic to admit, is that they're an alcoholic. The next thing that is difficult for an alcoholic to admit, is that they don't have enough "will-power" to stop on their own. According to the twelve-step program, the only hope for an alcoholic to stop drinking, is for them to finally admit they are powerless to do it on their own, and that they need help from some higher power.

This is how it is with us sinners. In the first place it's hard for us to admit we're sinners, and in the second place, it's also hard for us to admit we are powerless over it. But it's only in the letting go of that illusion, that we can finally understand the enormity of God's grace.

Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, in essence the Devil says; "If you are the Son of God" prove it! In other words, if you are the Son of God, be like God...

And Jesus responds in effect by noting that being the Son of God is not about pretending to be God, it is about doing God's will. Do you see the difference? It is about humility, being a servant, picking up our cross and doing what God would have us do-- love our neighbor...

Being like God and pretending to know good and evil is really a deep sickness. We try hard and we pray, we do the best we can, and ultimately we trust that it's all in God's hands. And believe me, God can do anything! God can even take an evil and turn it into something good.

A couple months after my shameful experience with Tim, we were on the playground at school, it was recess. Next to me, I happened to notice a classmate making fun of Tim. And I have no idea why, I'm usually not like that, I'm usually the peace maker, but that day I stood up for Tim. I told the bully to knock it off and pick on someone his own size.

The bully-- and I remember his name to this day-- glared at me and punched me in the gut. I keeled over, and just as he was going to hit me again, a teacher stopped him. I did not return evil for evil.

Of course, the teachers wanted to know what happened. I don't remember getting into trouble, so they must have had some empathy for me.

On that day I like to think I was on the right side of the good and evil equation, Tim experienced a little relief from his tormentors. And frankly I have no idea where that little courage came from. Did it have something to do with the previous experience? I don't know, but believe me miracles do happen.

The good news today is that God is God and we are not. God knows we are all Saints and Sinners and in bondage to sin. Through the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God meets us exactly where we're at.

We try as hard as we can to be good people. We know God heals the shame of our shortcomings and gives us the courage to try again. And God is always there to celebrate our success, and God is also there to pick us up when evil happens. He dusts us off, and sends us out to try again.

We are confident of God's presence, mercy and forgiveness. We are not God, and yet we are privileged-- that through us, God's kingdom comes, and that's all God's work...

Amen...