



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## The Root of Sin St. Matthew 4:1-11 Fr. William Klock

February 26, 2020 – Ash Wednesday

Today is the first day of Lent. I have no idea what Bp. Sutton will be preaching on this Sunday, but it's often the case that bishops, when they visit, preach on something other than the lessons of the day. This evening I want us to look, not at today's Gospel, but at the Gospel for this coming Sunday. If Bp. Sutton preaches on it too, you'll get it twice, but I don't think that's a bad thing. I want to preach on Sunday's Gospel because it ties closely to what I preached on this past Sunday in our study of Exodus. Let's look at Matthew 4:1-11. As we begin our own fast in preparation for our commemoration of Jesus' death and resurrection, the Church reminds us of the wilderness fast that Jesus made at the beginning of his ministry. You know the story well, I'm sure. Jesus had just been baptised by John. The heavens opened, the Spirit descended like a dove, and the Father spoke: "This is my beloved Son. In him I am well pleased." Jesus' identity and mission as the Messiah, as the Saviour and King was confirmed. He was the embodiment of Israel, so just like Israel, the Spirit led him into the wilderness to prepare. Forty days and forty nights he fasted. And the devil came to him: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread." Jesus responded with Scripture: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God."

The devil then took him to the top of the temple and said, "Throw yourself down"—and then he shows he can quote Scripture too—"He will command his angels concerning

you...they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone." But Jesus reminds him, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

A third time the devil tempted him, taking him to a mountain top and showing him the world spread out before him: "Fall down and worship me and I'll give you all this." And Jesus rebuked him, "Begone, Satan! It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only you shall serve.' With that, Matthew says, the devil left and angels were sent to minister to Jesus.

The lesson is about temptation, but did you notice that the temptations were ultimately about worship? The devil was trying to lure Jesus away from worshipping and trusting the one true God. We often think of temptation in terms of breaking a list of rules. And while sin is the breaking of God's commandments, temptation and sin actually get at something deeper than that. God's commandments aren't just arbitrary rules.

Brothers and Sisters, God calls us to know him, to love him, and to worship him. This is what he created us for. We were to live in his presence and bear his image. Creation is his temple and he created us to be his priests. But to serve the Lord is to trust in him—in his goodness and his wisdom, knowing that our vision is limited. How often do we think we've chosen the good or chosen what is wise, only to find that as things play out, we lacked some crucial bit of information, maybe we didn't account for someone else or for a change in circumstances, and things go wrong. Satan tempted Eve. He convinced her that God wasn't as good as he said he was, that he was holding out, and that she could take his role on herself. God has invited us to this great privilege and invitation to live in his presence and to be his image bearers, but we deceive ourselves, lower our gaze, and settle for something far less than what God offers. The Greek word for sin means "to miss the mark", and that's just

what happens when we sin. Like an arrow shot with poor aim, sin shoots wide or falls short of God's call to be truly human, to bear his image in the world.

Jesus knew this and that knowledge gave him a single-minded devotion. He gave his full allegiance to his Father and to the calling and mission his Father had given him. I can only imagine how hungry he was after a forty-day fast, but his Father had called him to fast and that's what he did. His devotion to the Father overrode the temptation of the devil to break his fast before the appointed time. His devotion to his Father overrode the temptation to shortcut his mission. Sure, Jesus could have jumped from the temple, angels would have rescued him, and everyone would have known who he was. Yes, he could have bowed the knee to the devil and been given lordship over the nations. That was his mission—to become the world's true Lord, but there was more to his mission. To become Lord apart from the Cross would have left humanity enslaved to sin and death. The Father's path to lordship lay only on the redeeming road of suffering and death. Submission to the Father, worship of the Father were far more important than merely elevating himself. Do we think about this when we think about temptation and sin? We tend to think of sin in terms of something that will make God angry with us, but sin goes deeper than that. God is angry with our sin, because it robs him of the worship he is due *and* because it causes us to miss the best he has for us. He offers us life and we choose death. Lewis summed it up so well when he wrote,

"If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child

who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

Lent reminds us of God’s goodness, God’s wisdom, and God’s good and wise plans for us. Lent reminds us not to take our life and our salvation for granted, but to look to Jesus, to see his cross and his resurrection as the fulfilment of God’s promises, to trust in him because he is supremely trustworthy, and to give him our all.

Think of the Israelites. When they entered Canaan they were instructed to worship the Lord with the firstfruits of their crops. The tithe was a reminder to them not to take the land for granted or as an automatic right. Everything reminded them that they were there because of the Lord’s saving grace. The commands to treat aliens in the land justly were reminders that they not only had God’s grace for themselves, but were to be channels and ministers of that grace to others. This is what it means to bear God’s image in the world and to be truly human. They failed. Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness was a sort of reboot. After a thousand years of failure, Israel’s representative and Messiah did what Israel had failed to do. His forty-day fast was a prelude to the creation of a new people, whose sole identifying badge is no longer race, circumcision, diet, or Sabbath, but allegiance to God through submission to Jesus, his King.

St. Paul reminds us that Jesus did indeed become the world’s true Lord—Lord of all that the devil showed him that day and more—but he became Lord not through the devil’s route. He became Lord through faithfulness to his vocation of suffering and death. And Jesus’ vocation is now reflected by our faithfulness to him as the Lord of all who has risen from the dead. This is at the centre of our baptismal vows. Faith in Jesus, in his death and

resurrection, and submission to his Lordship are what we affirm when we pass through the baptismal waters. And the devil now tempts us and strikes right at those vows and affirmations—right at the centre of our faith. We are truly human, we are truly God’s image bearers as we submit to his King and serve him with our obedience and our worship—trusting in his goodness and wisdom. And so the devil tempts us to stop trusting—to do it our own way, to trust (even if it’s just a little) in things that are not Jesus: Caesar, Aphrodite, Mammon. He tempts us to take shortcuts, rather than waiting on God to supply us with the good. And every time we miss the mark. We fall short of true humanity. Sometimes the mistake is obvious right away. Sometimes it takes time for the consequences to work themselves out. But we always miss the mark. We dishonour our Lord and we dishonour the great sacrifice he has made. Thank God that Lent reminds us of his mercy and his grace. Jesus’ blood—like the wine he gives us to drink at his Table—is strong stuff. It cleanses us from our sins past and it cleanses us from our sins today and in future. But, Friends, Lent also reminds us to reflect on the nature of true worship as the basis, the ground of true holiness. The more faithful we are in giving God his due in true worship, in trusting and obeying, the less often we will miss the mark. And that takes us back to Jesus and the cross. Jesus reminds of God’s faithfulness—of his goodness, his wisdom, and most of all his trustworthiness. He is the God who fulfils his promises, he is the God who saves, he is the God who seals us to himself by plunging us into his own Holy Spirit, and when we consider that, we can’t help but conclude that he is truly worthy of our loyalty, our allegiance, and our worship.

Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily

lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*