

“We Cried to the Lord ... and the Lord Heard Our Voice”

In the name of him who for us fasted forty days in the wilderness and overcame the temptations of the evil one, dear friends in Christ: In today’s Gospel lesson, we see the Lord Jesus showing great strength of faith and perfect trust in his heavenly Father in the face of severe physical deprivation and spiritual attack. Though he is hungry, thirsty, dirty, and weary he responds firmly to the temptations of Satan with the Word of God, and he stands fast. He will not be moved, and he will not fall. No amount of pressure, beguiling enticement, or deceptive sophistry thrown at him by the devil can get him to stray from his divinely ordained course. In other words, we see Jesus do what we cannot and do not do: stand firm against the temptations and lies of Satan.

Now, we might think, “Well, of course Jesus stands fast against Satan; in addition to being a man, he’s God. What’s impossible for us is easy for him.” But that kind of thinking is wrong. One thing you will never see Jesus do is use any of his divine powers for his personal benefit. To be our substitute for sin, he had to live a perfect life as a man. He had to live with all the constraints that we do – except without sin. And so it’s as a man that he faces the temptation. After forty days without eating, he’s just as hungry and weak as you would be. And when Satan offers him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, it’s every bit as attractive an offer to Jesus as it would be to you or me. The thing is, Satan doesn’t have to make us that kind of offer. He can get us to fall into temptation and sin at a much, much cheaper rate.

As a thought experiment with my confirmands, in order to show that we’re all murderers at heart, I have them imagine a button. It’s sort of a magic button that they’re being given – kind of like the easy button they used to have on the commercials. If they press it – and they can only press it once – they will instantly receive whatever it is their heart desires; but it has to be something for them. It can’t be “world peace” or some other lofty ideal like that. No, it has to be fame, fortune, riches, talents, skills; perhaps a certain someone as a spouse; maybe even healing for a loved one who’s sick or dying. That’s what pushing the button will do. But there’s a downside: if they push the button, somewhere on the other side of the world, somebody they don’t know and will never even hear of, will suddenly drop dead. Oh, and no one will ever know – except God, of course. You can’t hide things from him. Then I put the question to them: would you kill someone to get what you want? I put the question to you: would you? If your initial response is “No, never!” then I’d ask to you to think about the times in your life when you wanted something so much it hurt and you were crushed with disappointment. Would you have pushed it then? Yes, you would. Admit it. I’m just glad that people on the other side of the world don’t have buttons like that. *We’d* all be dropping dead. Of course, if *everyone* had one, I don’t think the human race wouldn’t last a week.

What I’m trying to stress here is just how morally weak and pathetic we are. Under the right conditions there isn’t any sin we are above committing, no depth of depravity to which we wouldn’t sink. As much as we like to point fingers at those we consider to be the real villains, deep down we know (and hate to admit) that we are made of the same stuff they are. And this is why we need God’s grace – his unmerited favor and infinite forgiveness – and a Savior as strong and great as the Son he sent. The important thing is that we never forget that.

This is what today’s Old Testament lesson is about: not forgetting what God has done and continues to do to save us. What’s described is a fairly elaborate thanksgiving ritual. Moses is talking to the Israelites on the plains of Moab shortly before they go in to take possession of the

Promised Land. They've been wandering in this desert wasteland for forty long years. Now the goal is in sight. The land flowing with milk and honey lies before them. Moses himself, you remember, will not be going with them. According to the Word of the Lord, this is as far as he gets to go. But he is concerned that after he's gone and they take up their inheritance and get settled, and they become rich and comfortable, that they may forget who they are and where they came from. They may become proud and self-reliant, imagining that they themselves earned the goal by their own strength and wits, or that they somehow deserved it. And so Moses prescribes an annual ritual of remembrance and thanksgiving precisely so that they do not forget.

"When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance and have taken possession of it and live in it", he tells them, "you shall take some of the first fruits from all that you harvest ... and you shall put it in a basket ... and go the place where the Lord shall choose to make his name dwell" – which means at first where the Tabernacle will be permanently set up, and then later where the Temple will be when it is complete. That's the place the Lord dwelt with his people in a manifest way. Then, according to Moses, the basket full of produce is to be given to the priest who will set it before the altar of God. And then a verbal confession is to be made. First, the Israelites were to confess: "I declare today that to the Lord God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our fathers to give us."

The emphasis on this first part is on how the Lord keeps his promises. If he says he's going to do something, he does it. The basket full of fruit was tangible evidence of it. "I wouldn't have this unless the Lord gave me the land upon which it grew." The implication, then, is that because the Lord has proven faithful in the past, he can therefore be counted upon to be faithful in the future. He keeps his Word. You never have cause to doubt it.

And then comes the second part of the confession, which is a brief litany of Israel's history. "A wandering Aramean was my father" it begins. And it's not clear whether the reference here is to Abraham, whom the Lord called out of Ur of the Chaldees to inherit the Promised Land, or to Jacob, his grandson, to whom also the promise was given. I suspect it's deliberately vague because it refers to them both. In any case, the Arameans were pagans. They did not know the Lord nor did they worship him. They had idols of useless, false gods instead. And so by acknowledging that their forefathers were Arameans, the Israelites were confessing that they were spiritually in the dark. That's emphasized by the word which is weakly translated "wandering". Actually, what the word means is lost or dying. So the description is of someone who is utterly helpless, who has nothing in this world, who is spiritually out of touch, and who is going nowhere except, ultimately, to hell.

The confession continues with an account of Israel's sojourn in Egypt. It was the place to which they fled for salvation when still few in number – to escape the famine in the days of Joseph. Initially, you will recall, they were welcomed as guests of honor; but then things didn't turn out so well. On one hand, they did grow into a great and populous nation as the Lord had promised; but it was precisely this growth – this blessing of the Lord – that caused the Egyptians to fear and despise them. And so "The Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor." It's an "out of the frying pan into the fire" kind of thing. "We went from lost and without hope to enslavement and misery."

And then comes the all important turning point in the confession: "Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. And he brought us into this land, a land flowing with milk and honey."

Did you catch that? Do you see what the turning point hinges on? Listen: the Lord God is by nature gracious and loving and kind. He likes to do good things for people. As Jesus said, he causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the just and the wicked alike. It's just the way he is. But there is nothing sweeter in the ears of the Lord than the sound of his children crying out to him for help. And it's not because he needs it or that it gratifies him in some way; no, it's because then he knows that we see how things are, that we are weak, helpless, and totally dependent upon him, and that we are looking to him for deliverance and for every good thing. That's when he acts. And as we heard, he acts in a big way.

For the Israelites in Egypt, it meant sending Moses to deliver his people. It was no small feat. You remember that it took the increasingly terrible ten plagues to bring the Egyptians to their knees. And even then, they didn't want to let God's people go. In the end it took the parting of the Red Sea through which the nation of Israel passed in safety, and in which the pursuing army of the Pharaoh drowned. But even then it was far from over. When the people cried out for water in the desert, the Lord gave it to them. When they cried out for food, he fed them with bread from heaven. When enemies attacked and his people cried out, he defended them. The problems always happened when the people either thought they could go it alone without the Lord's help, or when they forgot the Lord's promises and didn't turn to him for aid and relief.

But these things are types and foreshadows of an even greater deliverance that God planned for his people: the deliverance from the slavery of sin, death, and the power of the devil, which God worked with mighty signs and wonders by the Lord Jesus Christ. This salvation was accomplished for all people when Jesus with arms outstretched on the cross and his body racked with pain gave his life to satisfy God's justice for the sins of the world. But the only ones who actually receive the benefit of this salvation are the ones who acknowledge their helplessness and need. They are the ones who see their wretched, sinful condition; know their inability to save themselves by their own merit, goodness, or worthiness; and who cry to the Lord for his saving grace. And when the Lord hears their cry, he delivers them in a big way.

He washes them in holy Baptism, unites them with Jesus, and makes them his own children. He gives them his Holy Spirit and creates in them a new heart. He gives them a home in his Church and sees to their instruction – so that their souls are fed. And he gives them the crucified and raised body and blood of his Son to strengthen their faith and assure them of his forgiveness. And keeping them in the communion of his Church, he has promised to bring them to their inheritance in his everlasting Promised Land.

The danger for us, like it was for the Israelites, is that we forget who we are and where we came from; that having become rich and comfortable in a spiritual sense, we grow proud and self-reliant, imagining that got here by our own strength and virtue, or that we somehow deserve it. It's then that we will forget to cry out to the Lord – and then we will be truly lost, without God and without hope in the world.

And this is precisely why the Lord gives us rituals of remembrance and thanksgiving. This is why we assemble here in the church to confess our failures and shortcomings – to declare that we are poor, miserable sinners who can do nothing but cry out to the Lord; cry out to the Lord who hears and answers the needs of his people with the mighty works of salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ our Lord. Therefore let us cry out to him, now and always. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!