**Weekend of Sunday, February 26, 2022**

**1st Sunday in Lent/Year A**

**First Reading: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7**

**Second Reading: Romans 5:12-19**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 4:1-11**

***“Building Character with God”***

**Theme**

**Texts:**

1Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4But he answered, "It is written,  
 'One does not live by bread alone,  
 but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"  
5Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6saying 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,  
 so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"  
7Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"  
8Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 10Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,  
 'Worship the Lord your God,  
 and serve only him.'"  
11Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

**Sermon**

One of the effects of my Holy Land Pilgrimage is that I cannot read a passage of scripture without wanting to find the location on a map and reflect on how close I came to that site. You will hear me repeat this at the midweek Lent program: I was a skeptic of the location of the venerated holy sites. My thought was, "How could anyone possibly know for sure?" Well, according to Ezra, my guide, who is a Christian and has lived his entire life in Israel, there is a very high degree of certainty about many of the sites, and contrary to the way I always thought about these things, that is because Jesus became a much bigger deal quicker post-resurrection than I thought. So after the resurrection, when the apostles began repeating their gospels, there was interest in all things Jesus, and there were still people around who could say, without a doubt, where events of Jesus' life and ministry took place.

Such is the case with the Gospel Reading for today. Can we know with a great degree of certainty, where the location of the temptation of Christ was? Yes, we can.

Before our Gospel Reading, Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River. Now, I am disappointed to tell you that there are two traditional sites of John's baptism: one site is at Yardenit, which is where the Sea of Galilee empties into and forms the Jordan River, in the region of Galilee. This is where I did my baptismal affirmation. All I can say is that it took place in the Jordan River. However, I think it is dubious to say that Yardenit is where John baptized Jesus.

Map of Judea

The gospels agree that John's baptism took place in the "wilderness of Judea" and the Gospel of John more specifically states that John baptized at "Bethany beyond the Jordan" (1:28) on the east side of the Jordan River in modern-day Jordan, so you can see why we didn't go there. Furthermore, it is thought that John was an Essene, and the Essenes lived at what is known as Qumran today, (Qumaroan is the site where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found). Qumran is also located in the wilderness of Judea, near the Dead Sea. All this to say that it is with a very high degree of certainty that the mountain identified locally as the Mount of Temptation is the authentic site.

Mount of Temptation

And, as we drove down route 90 to visit the Dead Sea, Qumran, and Masada, Ezra pointed out this high mountain to the west as the site of the temptation of Jesus.

And, as if the location of the Mount of Temptation isn't enough, in the passage, specifically verse 5, the devil mysteriously took Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple. Well, the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE and never rebuilt. The Temple Mount I saw and walked on is nothing like it was at the time of Jesus.

Model Temple

However, there is a 1/50th scale model of the Old City at the Museum of Israel, and having seen what the Old City looks like today, the model is very helpful in understanding what Jesus experienced. This high point in the Temple Mount in the lower left corner is the highest point of the Temple complex – this is where Jesus was taken. See what has happened to me? My ministry of teaching and preaching is changed forever!

Finally to the core of the sermon today, as we read this passage from Matthew, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. But even amid temptation, Jesus remained steadfast in his faith and obedience to God. Temptation does not equal sin. Jesus was tempted and yet did not sin. Why did God allow his Son and the Savior of the world to be tempted? For the same reason, God allows us to be tempted. Overcoming temptation or any other spiritual obstacle is an opportunity to build character and spiritual strength, and God loves it when we do that, in fact, it brings God glory!

In the same way, we too will face temptations and trials in our own lives. We will be tempted by all sorts of the world's charms that will try to lure us away from the path of godliness and lead us astray. But, like Jesus, we have the power of the Holy Spirit within us to resist and stay true to our faith in God revealed in Jesus Christ.

The key to resisting temptation is to be well-equipped with the Word of God – the Word being Jesus Christ himself. Indeed, his purpose was to reveal God, and so he wants to be known by us because through him we come to know our Heavenly Father. And we *can* know him through scripture, meditation, and prayer.

Jesus himself used scripture to combat the devil's temptations. When he was tempted to turn stones into bread, he replied, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." (Matt 4:4)

So, the best way to deal with temptation is to make sure we know who is fighting beside us, our Lord and brother, Jesus Christ. And the way we do that is to be well-equipped with the Word of God. If you are looking for a spiritual discipline to take on this Lent, get to know Jesus better through scripture, meditation, and prayer, so that when temptations come your way, you too can use the Word of God, Jesus Christ, to combat them.

Evil will not give up easily. It is relentless; it comes back again and again. That's why it is also important for us to remain in close fellowship with God revealed in Jesus Christ through prayer – another important spiritual discipline. Jesus not only quoted the scripture, but also he came out of the temptation by calling upon God's name.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

So I exhort you, brothers and sisters, God in Christ, through the Holy Spirit is on our side. We can resist temptation, and we can do it by 1) knowing God revealed in Jesus Christ, 2) through the study of scripture, meditation, and prayer, and 3) like Jesus, remembering to call on God's name when we are facing temptations. For Jesus said, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." (John 15:7)

Sisters and brothers, let us take inspiration from Jesus' example and remember that we too can resist evil and stay true to our faith. By being well-equipped with the Word of God and staying close to God through prayer, we can overcome any temptation that comes our way.

**Prayer**

God of the wilderness, as we devote these forty days to you, shape us by your Holy Spirit into the image of Christ our Lord, so that we may be ready, by your grace, to confront the power of evil that surrounds us with your promise to be with us until you gather us to yourself in eternal life. We pray this in the name of the overcomer, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen