

Lent 1, February 26, 2023

**MATTHEW 4:1–11.** (EHV)

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil. After he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The Tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread.” But Jesus answered, “It is written: Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God” [Deut. 8:3]. Then the Devil took him into the holy city. He placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, and he 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 they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone” [Ps. 91:11–12]. Jesus said to him, “Again, it is written: You shall not test the Lord your God” [Deut. 6:16]. Again the Devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. He said to him, “I will give you all of these things, if you will bow down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Go away, Satan! For it is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only” [Deut. 6:13]. Then the Devil left him, and just then angels came and served him.

Have you had any conversations with the devil lately?

Martin Luther often talked about his struggles against the devil, and he often described those struggles in terms of a conversation. He said the devil usually came to dispute with him at night while he was trying to sleep. He would often try to get Luther to doubt by reminding him of his sins or by asking Luther if he really thought he alone knew the truth and all the other church authorities were in error.

We might raise our eyebrows at such stories, or at the concept of conversing with the devil. But the fact is, every time the devil tempts us, we have a conversation with him.

How do your conversations with the devil end? That is, when he tempts you, what is the result? Who wins? Who has the final word?

In the original Greek of our text, Jesus basically ends his conversation with the devil with one word. Translators struggle to capture it. The EHV translates that one word, “Go away!” Others variously render it, “Away from me!” “Away with you!” “Begone!” But we non-big-city folks have an advantage this morning over these scholarly translators. There is one English word that perfectly captures the one word Jesus used to end his conversation with Satan, and I’ve only ever heard it in more rural settings, usually spoken to a stray dog or some other unwanted animal: “Git!”

This morning, let’s strike up a brief conversation with the devil. Let’s tell him what Jesus told him: “Git, Satan! You have attacked Jesus with your best. He has defeated you even at his worst.”

**1.**

“Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil.” Think of how the devil must have been licking his chops on the day when Jesus first arrived in the wilderness. Ever since God told the devil, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers. He will crush your head and you will strike his heel,” he had been dying to prove God wrong.

God had slowly revealed over time more and more about the coming Messiah, not only for the faith of his people, but also to mock the devil. The Messiah would come from David's line, so the devil tried to lead all Judah's kings astray. He would come from a virgin, so Satan led many of the young women of Judah into all sorts of sexual sins, some of them connected with the worship of foreign gods. He would come from Bethlehem, so Satan tried to keep the town small and insignificant, and he tried to keep the descendants of David out of it. He even succeeded in having the whole nation of Judah carried off into exile for a time. He would come during the rule of the Roman Empire, so the devil made the Romans and the Jews hostile to one another.

Yet despite all his efforts, Jesus the Son of David was born in Bethlehem during the reign of Caesar Augustus. He grew up unharmed and appeared at the Jordan River when he was about thirty years old to be anointed with the Holy Spirit and power in his baptism. Satan perhaps was just in the process of wringing his hands in frustration and fury when God told him, "He's out in the wilderness. He's all yours. Have at him."

In fact, Satan didn't just have him in the wilderness. He had him for forty days in the wilderness. All his best ideas and plans plotted out on the drawing board he could now carry out as he saw fit.

Satan tempted him throughout those forty days to no avail. But Jesus was getting hungrier, weaker. So on the final day, with passion and effort that can come only from desperation, from time running out, Satan brought his best last.

"[Jesus] was hungry. The Tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread.'" "I got Adam and Eve with food, and they weren't even hungry. Surely I can get Jesus with food," the devil thought. And on the surface, it looks like a pretty good temptation, doesn't it? It actually sounds kind of fun. Who of you, if you knew you had the ability to do so, wouldn't love to zap a bunch of stones and turn them all into loaves of bread? And this is Jesus. He owns the whole world. Certainly he has a right to some of its bread in his hunger, right?

Not only that, but the devil is also issuing him a dare. "You call yourself God's Son. God calls you his Son. Show me. Show yourself." When you tell someone something exciting about yourself that's true, and they don't believe you, what do you immediately want to do? Prove them wrong. The temptation is for Jesus to show off, to live by sight and not by faith.

But the underlying temptation is for Jesus to go against the will of God. Who sent him out to the wilderness to fast and be tempted by the devil for forty days? The Holy Spirit. The devil is telling Jesus, "Give up this difficult trial that God has appointed for you. You've made it this far; that's good enough. You deserve better."

But Jesus resists with the word of God: "It is written: Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God." What is Jesus's point? That a person needs more than bread for balanced nutrition? No. Jesus is pointing out that food as such has no power to sustain and help us. If God does not say to our food, as it were, "Nourish this person's body," it will not do so. "Sure, Satan, I could turn these stones into bread. But God, the one who gives bread its ability to nourish, did not send me here to eat bread. He sent me here to fast. So am I supposed to expect it to turn out well if I create food for myself and then eat it against God's will? Does that make any sense?"

So the devil has to regroup and come up with an alternative strategy. “Then the Devil took him into the holy city. He placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, and he 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 they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

How did Jesus refute Satan the first time? “It is written.” And so what does Satan give as the basis for this temptation? “It is written.” Then he quotes the Bible at length! I’m guessing most of you learned Psalm 91:11 in Catechism Class. But could any of you have recited verse 12 by heart too? Satan did.

I don’t know if you ever complained about the memory work your pastor gave you in Catechism instruction, but this temptation shows there is no place whatsoever for such complaining. Do you really want Satan to know more Scripture than you do? Doesn’t the prospect of Satan tempting you using the same holy book you use make you shudder?

And what’s the temptation underlying Satan’s recitation? “Jesus, if you don’t throw yourself off the temple, you’re showing that you don’t trust God. You’re showing that you don’t know his word. You’re God’s Son. This is God’s temple. This is where you worship. This is where people worship you. If you can’t trust God to send his angels to protect you *here*, how trustworthy is he?”

There is another dare in this temptation too. Satan has just said, “It is written.” How will Jesus respond? If he also says, “It is written,” again, he will be using Satan’s same reasoning, won’t he? If Satan can quote Scripture to tempt him, then maybe Scripture isn’t the answer. Maybe he should come up with something new, something different, something more innovative, something more exciting with which to counteract Satan.

“Jesus said to him, ‘Again, it is written: You shall not test the Lord your God.’” “Satan, you think you know Scripture, but you don’t really know it if you don’t know what it means. And you don’t know what it means if you just take one passage out of context and ignore what the rest of it says. You say God will command his angels concerning me. But you left out the part where he says they will guard me in all my ways. Me jumping off the pinnacle of the temple is not one of my normal ways; it is one of your ways. You say God will use his angels to protect me. That is true, but how does he do that? In part by giving me a brain so that I don’t put my own life in danger through foolish decisions. If I *were* to do that, I would be putting God to the test, which God himself forbids. Would that make any sense?”

Satan is running out of time, and running out of options. “The Devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. He said to him, ‘I will give you all of these things, if you will bow down and worship me.’” As a kid, I used to think this temptation was just plain stupid. The devil promising to give Jesus what was already his and asking Jesus to bow down and worship him? Give me a break. But even though it is stupid of Satan to tempt Jesus, this temptation isn’t as stupid as I originally thought. Think about it: In a moment he whisks Jesus away to a very high mountain. Was it Mount Hermon? Was it Mount Everest, the highest mountain on earth? Either way, impressive. Then, in a moment, he shows him all the kingdoms of the world. Surely Jesus could already see some of them from on top of that mountain, but Satan makes it so that he can see all of them. Then he gives Jesus a zoom-in glance, showing him also their riches and comforts and pleasures and beauty and power

and influence. Nearly everything you could possibly aspire to, nearly everything you could possibly put on your Wish List or your Bucket List—whether it should be there or not—the devil showed Jesus all at once. And Jesus was not just fully God, but also fully human, and a weak and tired and hungry human at that.

“See all this power I have, Jesus? See what I can show you? See what I can give you? I’ll tell you what, you bow down and worship me, and I’ll let you have all this. Break the First Commandment, Jesus. Don’t worship God. Worship me.”

But even though it was a stronger temptation than I originally thought it was as a kid, Jesus still saw it clearly for the foolishness it was, and he has now had enough. There is only one word for Satan: Git! “Git, Satan! For it is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.” Once again Jesus uses the Word.

Now the devil leaves. He has to. Jesus doesn’t tempt the devil. He commands him, and the devil must obey. That’s it. That’s all the devil has. We might be tempted to laugh: “Ha, Satan! You have waited over 4,000 years for this moment, and that’s the best you had?”

But how do you think Satan would respond to that? “You laugh at me. You mock me and ask, ‘Is that the best you have?’ But how many times have much more modest efforts worked on you?” For a moment it seems like we have no answer to that. For it is true enough that his temptations have worked on us, his temptations which, when you stop to think about it, make just as little sense as they did with Jesus.

“Disobey your parents,” he tells us when we are children. “Disobey the people that brought you into this world. Get angry the people on earth who feed and care for you, who love you most, who want what’s best for you, who have more life experience than you do.” Does that make any sense?

“Fool around and have fun with any person who catches your eye!” he tells us when we are young. “Put your education, your career, your emotional and financial stability at risk. Don’t just squander the most cherished physical gift you have, but take it away from others too. Put yourself at risk for disease. Tarnish your trustworthiness. Make love cheap.” Does that make any sense?

“Don’t trust God. Take matters into your own hands,” he tells us when we are older. “Look at how out of control the political and social scene is! Look at that toxic train wreck in Ohio! Look at how things are at work or in your family! Sure, God made the universe and he made you. Sure, he sent his Son to die for you and take away your sins and raised him from the dead—the most powerful act ever performed—and he’s kept all his promises to you so far. But he’s lost control now. You’re in control of your own life.” Does that make any sense?

No. It doesn’t. Yet we have listened to him. We have fallen prey to his temptations. And so, while we are okay with Jesus telling Satan to git, we perhaps feel powerless to tell him that ourselves.

## 2.

But that in itself is a temptation—when the devil diverts attention away from this battle between him and Jesus and focuses our eyes on the battle between him and ourselves. Does that make any sense? Does it make any sense to dwell on the lost battles with Satan throughout history?

Let us rather look at the One who won. After all, he came to do battle for us because he knew we could not win the battle ourselves. He came to defeat the devil for us, and he did it even at his worst.

Satan overcame mankind in a garden custom made by God himself for Adam and Eve. Yet he could not overcome Jesus in a wilderness.

Satan overcame mankind in the span of fifteen minutes or so. Yet he could not overcome Jesus in the span of forty days.

Satan overcame mankind when man and woman were together and had each other for mutual encouragement and support. Yet he could not overcome Jesus when he was all alone.

Satan overcame mankind when mankind was perfectly healthy, well-rested, content, and surrounded with every kind of rich and delicious food. Yet he could not overcome Jesus when he had gone without food for forty days and was hungry and weak.

Satan overcame mankind as they were surrounded by the bliss of perfection. Yet he could not overcome Jesus when he was surrounded by the effects of sin.

Satan overcame Adam. Yet he could not overcome the second Adam, Jesus Christ.

And he could not overcome him not because Jesus's used magic powers against him. Not because Jesus sent his angels to fight him. Not because Jesus flexed his muscles and summoned the powers of the universe to his side.

No, Satan could not overcome him because Jesus kept saying, "It is written." Jesus was physically weak and worn out, and yet by confronting Satan with God's word again and again, it was Jesus who was strengthened and Satan who had to give way.

Are we ready to answer Satan now? After all, we have a few It-Is-Written's of our own. "It is written: 'Just as through the disobedience of the one man, the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man, the many will be made righteous' (Rom. 5:19). It is written: 'It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast' (Eph. 2:8–9). It is written: 'The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work' (1 John 3:8).

"My salvation is anchored in Jesus's battle, not my battles. His victory is my victory. His salvation is my salvation. So git, Satan! You attacked Jesus with your best, but he defeated you even at his worst. And if he defeated you at his worst, then he defeated you always. He crushed your head in the wilderness, and so he crushed your head when he died, and he proved it when he rose.

"Git, Satan. Git on outta here! Jesus says so." Amen.