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Matthew 4:1-11

GOD SENDS HIS BEST AGAINST THE BEST

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The college basketball season is almost over and yet it's only beginning. They have been playing for five months now. Most teams have played some thirty games or more. Their season will be over in another week or so. The best teams will play in the NCAA tournament which will take place over the course of two and a half weeks. Teams will play all year for the chance to get into the tournament. It is one and you're done! In other words, if you lose one time in the tournament you will go home. It doesn't matter if you won your conference. It doesn't matter if you were considered the best team in the country. It doesn't even matter if you were undefeated. If you lose once, you will go home as a loser. Most in our state will be cheering for Michigan and/or Michigan State. Right now, neither looks like a lock to make the tournament.

Teams will take different approaches to the season. Some teams will play only teams that they should beat by a lot. They want to be 9-0, 10-0 going into conference play. Others want to play good teams right from the start, seeing how well they can do and seeing what they need to improve at the next level.

We are going to see a battle this morning, a battle for our very souls, a battle that will have eternal consequences. On the one hand there is the undefeated champion, the tempter, the liar, the devil, Satan. He led Adam and Eve to doubt God's goodness and love. They renounced their trust and obedience in God and transferred them to Satan. Sin and death would come into the world and every person born into the world as their offspring would be infected with the fatal disease of sin and they would die.

This past Ash Wednesday we began the Lenten season. We looked at the name of Jesus which means Savior. We think of the promise that God first gave to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God would put enmity or hatred between Satan and the woman and between Satan's seed and the seed of the woman. The woman's Seed would crush Satan's head and Satan would strike his heel. The battle is before us this morning. God was not going to wait. GOD SENT HIS BEST AGAINST THE BEST.

Jesus had just been baptized at the Jordan River. It was there that the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove. He is anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power. God the Father declares Jesus to be his beloved Son with whom the Father is well-pleased. And now Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. There would be only one victor here. There would be no draw where both could be declared the winner. One would emerge victorious. Jesus was fighting for us.

Jesus has often been called the second Adam who came to do what the first Adam was unable to do and to undo what the first Adam had done. The first Adam had rejected God's Word, believing Satan's lies instead of God's truth. He believed that God would not provide the wisdom that Satan offered. The second Adam had to show full trust in God's word and promises. He had to take away sin. Adam's sin had to be paid for because God is a God of perfect justice who cannot overlook sin. Jesus would ultimately take the sin of Adam and Eve and their descendants to the cross and pay the full ransom price for them.

Jesus was also retracing the path of the nation of Israel who was led out of Egypt to the Promised Land. They were asked to trust fully in God to protect them and to provide for them. They were in the very same wilderness where the same Satan tempted them and they, like Adam and Eve before them, rejected God and listened to the father of lies. They did not believe that God could and would provide food for them. They did not believe that God could and would protect them from their enemies. They did not believe that God could or would bring them safely to the land that he had promised. They would wander for forty years. The original generation of Israelites would die in the desert because of their unbelief, their stubborn refusal to take God at his word. Jesus was now the nation of Israel, reduced to one man.

Jesus had been in the wilderness for over a month, forty days. He had gone without food for 40 days and 40 nights. He would be hungry. Satan's first temptation is a natural one and a simple one: "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." We know what human appetites are like, don't we? We know what the appetites for food and drink, for sleep, for sexual satisfaction can do. They can be good or bad, depending upon the situation. We know how those appetites can affect our thoughts, our words, and our actions. We can think of nothing else. Those appetites consume our thoughts, and we want those appetites satisfied.

Jesus was a human being just like us. This temptation, like all of them, was very real. Jesus' temptation was much more difficult than Adam and Eve's. Adam and Eve were in a garden that was filled with trees and fresh and tasty fruits. Jesus was in the wilderness where there was no food. He was all alone. There were snakes and scorpions and wild animals.

Satan got Adam and Eve to doubt the truthfulness of God's words. He would try the same here. "If you are the Son of God..." God the Father had assured his Son of that fact. Satan is saying, "It surely doesn't look as though you are the beloved Son of God. You are out here alone in the wilderness without any food. Could you be mistaken? This does not look like the way the Father would treat his beloved Son."

"Why don't you take matters into your own hands? See those rocks over there. Show me that you are the Son of God. Turn those rocks into freshly baked bread. You can show me that you really are God's Son, and you can eat at the same time. You know how good that bread will smell, and it will taste even better. Go ahead, do it!"

This temptation was designed to get Jesus to doubt his heavenly Father on two points, first that he was indeed God's beloved Son and secondly, that the Father would provide for all his needs. If Jesus had succumbed to Satan's temptation he would have said to his Father that he could not trust what he said. "Man shall not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." Adam and Eve failed the test. The nation of Israel failed the test. Jesus would not fail.

Satan will now go in the opposite direction. Jesus has this wonderful trust in his Father. Let's see how strong that trust really is. Satan takes Jesus to the city of Jerusalem and brings him to the temple. Here is where God is worshiped. Jesus could show the proper worship for his Father by showing how much he trusted in the Father to protect him from all harm and danger. Jesus believed in the angels. Jesus believed the words of Scripture. Satan wanted to put him to a test. Jesus was on the highest point of the temple. Jerusalem is a city on a hill. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. The angels will protect you."

Once again Satan is going to try to get Jesus to question whether he really is the Son of God. You see how quickly Satan can change his tactics, always trying to be your friend, always trying anything he can to get you to fall. He is very believable as Adam and Eve and every one of us has seen over our lifetimes. He doesn't always come out with a complete lie. Sometimes he tells half-truths. Sometimes he simply forgets to add a little detail. Sometimes he leaves

something out. He likes to twist the truth to the point that you don't even know what the truth is. He tries to make the unbelievable believable.

Satan here tried to pit one word of Scripture against another. It is true that God promises to protect us through his holy angels. God does not promise to protect us if we stand in front of a freight train or jump out of an airplane without a parachute. The Israelites always wanted to put God to the test by demanding a miracle. Time and time again Jesus would see that with the Pharisees and teachers of the Law.

People like to pit Scripture against Scripture. They will speak of love. They will say that a loving God would never condemn anyone to hell, setting aside any passage that says that a holy God will damn anyone who rejects his grace in Christ. They justify any sexual perversion in the name of "love" and call anyone who calls such things "sin" as unloving, including Moses, Peter, Paul and our Lord Jesus. We are to interpret Scripture with Scripture, not picking and choosing what we want, when it is convenient for us.

Finally, Satan takes Jesus to a high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you if you will bow down and worship me." He offered everything that appeals to our human flesh: gold, silver, precious gems, a palace, beautiful women, fast cars, power, you name it! Satan talked as though all these things were his to give. He always talks that way. He offers and he cannot deliver.

The true temptation that Satan was holding out to Jesus was that he could have all the glory without the suffering. Why go through the Lenten journey? Why allow yourself to be betrayed, denied, forsaken, beaten, whipped, and mocked by friend and foe alike? Why go through the agony of drinking the horrible cup the Father gave you to drink? Why allow yourself the pain of being hoisted up on the cross and suffering the agony of hell for a people who would never appreciate you? You don't have to do that. Skip the suffering. Stay away from Gethsemane and Golgotha. Take the kingdom now, without the suffering.

This was indeed a very real temptation that Jesus faced as a man. We know how we want to run from suffering. We know how we want power and wealth and glory. We know how our own selfish desires will supersede God's plan for us. Jesus came to fulfill his Father's will. He came to destroy the work of Satan. He would do whatever it took to accomplish our salvation. He would take no shortcuts. "Away from me, Satan! Worship the Lord your God and serve him only!"

God sent his very best against the best. Jesus emerged from the wilderness victorious. He had resisted every temptation of the evil one. If he had succumbed just once, he could not have been the perfect Sacrificial Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. Satan would continue to try to get Jesus to take the easy way out in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross at Calvary. Jesus would not flinch. The main point of this first Sunday in Lent is that we rejoice that Jesus did what we are unable to do in resisting all of the temptations of Satan. His perfection is credited to our account as he takes our sins in exchange. Satan is defeated! There is a new champion. Thanks be to God! AMEN.