



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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1st Sunday of Lent

February 14, 2016

“It is Written”

(Luke 4:2)

Rev. David K. Groth

*“Jesus was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days,
being tempted by the devil” (Lk. 4:2).*

COLLECT: O Lord God, You led Your ancient people through the wilderness and brought them to the promised land. Guide the people of Your Church that following our Savior we may walk through the wilderness of this world toward the glory of the world to come; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Through Gail's work in Madison, we've come to know one of the zookeepers at Vilas Zoo. Jeff had been inviting us for a private tour of the zoo, and we took him up on it over Christmas break when the girls were home from school.

We went into the winter quarters of the White Rhinoceros. Jeff was the first in and said, "Hey George. Come over here!" And to my astonishment George, about the size of my car, happily came stomping over. He thrust his enormous head, with those menacing horns, through the bars, as far as his shoulders would allow. "You can go ahead and touch him" Jeff said. "He likes to be scratched in that soft spot behind the ears." And so . . . we did! We gathered around and started scratching a big old White Rhinoceros behind his ears. I took a close look at his eyes, and his lids started to droop and close from the pleasure. After a minute George pulled his enormous head back and trotted around in a happy victory lap and thrust it back through again for another go around. You might have guessed: he's been at the zoo for decades and has become about as domesticated as a white rhino can be.

Then Jeff took us to the Giraffe house. "They don't like to be touched" Jeff said, "but they do love these special crackers." He gave us a handful and said, "Stand with your back facing the Giraffe and hold the cracker next to your cheek." We did, each taking a turn. And the Giraffe named Wally stooped his head way down over the brick wall. We could feel his whiskers on our cheeks and his warm breath blowing down on us. (He must have enormous lungs.) Ever so gently, he nuzzled the crackers from our hands. It was

just remarkable.

Outside, Jeff pointed out a large African lion named Shakura. She was sitting on a large boulder. He said that's her favorite winter spot because it's actually fake, hollow and heated. We didn't even try to get close to Shakura. Jeff doesn't trust her at all. He pointed out a tall wall made of glass, and he said, "You'll notice it's kind of cloudy in places." That's not because it's dirty. That's because when little kids come close, Shakura starts clawing at the glass. He said, "Lions are actually cowardly predators. They will rarely take on anything that might cause them injury, preferring smaller, harmless prey." He pointed out a shack within the lion's area, and said in the summer, her favorite spot is on top of that shack because then she has a good view of the playground for toddlers just yards away. There's a big shoe in the playground, with a slide that sends the toddlers out through the open toe, and Shakura likes to sit there on the shack and watch, but not like an adoring mother. Jeff's greatest fear is that one day Shakura is going to manage to get out.

It made me think of that text in 1 Peter. "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith" (5:8). It also makes me think of this text in Luke where the devil goes after Jesus. You know, if the devil isn't afraid to take on Jesus, he's certainly not afraid of you.

Right after his baptism, the Spirit led Jesus into the desert, where he fasted for forty days. In a classic understatement, Luke says "he was hungry." Actually, he's on the front edge of starvation. He's at the place where hardly anything else matters more than food.

Meanwhile, notice how patient the devil is. A week goes by, and the devil does nothing. Two weeks, three, four and Jesus is still baking out there in the desert sun. The devil checks in on Jesus now and then to see if he's done. After five weeks, the devil still hasn't made a move, but is quietly observing from a distance. He's waiting for the most

opportune moment.

I guess that's the first point. Don't expect his temptations to come when you're at your strongest, when you're feeling like your best self. Expect him and his temptations when you're sick, when you're tired, when you're worn out. Expect the devil to be active when you're over-worked, alone, stressed and anxious. Expect him when you're old and dying.

Remember Pastor Seegers? One of the things I loved about him was how honest and open he was. Days before his death he said, "I never expected the devil to be attacking me like he is at this stage of my life." I've heard others say similar things. Don't be deceived. Little children and teens are prime targets, but the devil will also set his sights on the elderly grandmother, life-long Christian, ardent keeper of the faith in her final weeks. The elderly may need our witness, our prayers, our Christian support more than we think.

With Jesus, after forty days of fasting, of course the devil would start with food. "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." That's the second point. The devil attacks not just *when* we are at our weakest, but where he knows we are hurting, or wanting. Where's your weak spot? What's your hunger? For what are you starving? The need for success? For rich experiences? Sex? Loving relationship? Like any other enemy, the devil will exploit any perceived vulnerability. That's how ISIS would attack us, and that's how our armed forces would attack them. Where are they most vulnerable? Where are *you* most vulnerable? What steps can you take to protect yourself? Prayer certainly helps to fumigate the devil and his temptations. Being in the company of good friends can help, depending on who your friends are. (For some of you solitude is probably your best bet.) It can also be very helpful to hold yourself accountable to another individual, maybe your spouse, maybe a Stephen minister. In any event, Jesus responds to the devil, "It is written Man shall not live by bread alone."

Making no progress there, the devil circles around

and takes another swipe. He shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and says, "It'll all be yours if you only worship me." Now Satan has some dominion in this world, for sure, but he's offering things that are not his to give. He's making promises he cannot keep. That's one of his common strategies. He did that in the garden too, didn't he? "Eat this, and you'll be like God." We know how that worked out. He does it yet today, "Try this drug out just once. One time won't hurt you." He's called "the Great Deceiver" and "the Father of lies." That's what he does best.

"All this will be yours if you only worship me" the devil had said. He just happened to leave out that first commandment issue. Jesus reminds him. "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'"

So the devil is poking around at Jesus from different angles. Notice, he's not easily thwarted or discouraged. There's a lesson in that too. He's like a thief who's determined to break into your house. He'll try the easy way first, the front door, just in case you've left it unlocked. But he won't stop there. He'll go around back and try the patio door, then the garage door. He'll check if any of the windows are open. He'll climb up on to the roof if it will help, or burrow underneath if he must, or make his way in through the broad band. He's relentless because he knows his time is short. If Satan doesn't easily give up on Jesus, you know he won't easily give up on us.

Next, he took Jesus to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" Notice how Satan is adept at distorting God's Word and using it for his own purposes. That's his MO. That was his tactic in Genesis 3 and it was his approach thousands of years later with Jesus in the wilderness. It remains his approach today. Luther said, "All the cunning of the devil is exercised in trying to tear us away

from the Word of God.” But notice how Jesus, by example, directs us back to the Word of God. He answers every temptation beginning with the same words: “It is written . . .” In fact, these are the very first recorded words of his public ministry. The Word Incarnate points to the written Word. Doing so he endorses the written Word as the authority for your faith and life.

There’s got to be a lesson in the fact that he didn’t rely on sheer will power, or on his supernatural power, or even on his intelligence and wisdom. Instead, he took hold of God’s Word and submitted himself to it. That’s his lifeline out there in the wilderness. He sent Satan on his way befuddled and frustrated, by quoting the ancient, written Word of God. If sheer, blind obedience to the Word was good enough for Jesus, it’s good enough for you.

A few weeks ago in confirmation class we talked about the Passover. And it struck me, for the first time really, how odd the instructions must have sounded on the peoples’ ears. Each family was to take a perfectly good lamb, a male, a year old, without blemish. And on the 14th day of the month, they were to sacrifice it at twilight. Then they were to take some hyssop branches and dip it into the blood of the lamb and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel.

Very specific instructions, with no whys or wherefores or rationals given. Just do it this way. Surely the devil was tempting them to ignore Moses, tempting them to ignore those instructions, to dismiss it as a lot of unnecessary ceremony. Or at least they could cut corners. “Maybe it doesn’t need to be my *best* one year old male. Maybe this one over here would suffice . . . the one that’s coughing a lot and has some crud coming out of the eyes. Maybe I could even go over to a neighbor’s house and dip my hyssop branch in the blood of his lamb rather than laying waste to the cougher.”

God didn’t give them such specific instructions just to be difficult. He was training them to listen to God’s Word. But he also had other things in mind that would not be made

clear for many generations. One example: Picture a door here. The instructions were to take a hyssop branch and put the blood of the lamb first on the door posts, and then on the lintel. What motion did I just make? [Cross]. Exactly! And where is the blood? Where his hands are, his head, and his feet. Jesus is the Lamb of God who saves us from death. He is our Passover lamb! Even the hyssop branch points us to that truth. John 19:29, “so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth.”

Remember, it was the disobedience of the first Adam that ruined us. He submitted not to the Word of God, but to the temptations of the devil. The Second Adam, our Lord Jesus, submitted to God’s command. “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a lion . . . Resist him standing firm in the faith.” That’s what Jesus did. Every attack of Satan was met with the same, “It is written . . .” That made Jesus a worthy substitute for our sin. That made him a lamb without blemish or defect, *our* Passover Lamb, and our Savior. Amen.

