

21 February 2010
Lent 1

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“For Us Fights the Valiant One”
Text: Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

St. Paul told us today: ***If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.***

A few years ago, I received a phone call from a man who was troubled and wanted to talk to a pastor. So, I arranged a time to meet with him. And when I did, I found out that he was troubled about these very words of St. Paul. Troubled, and very worried. Because, he said, he believed, but he didn't know if he would be saved. Because you have to confess with your mouth, he said. And so, he told me, he had gone to a laundromat, and he went all around that place and told *everyone* there that he believed in Jesus. *So will he be saved now?* he asked. Because he did it. He confessed with his mouth. Was that enough? Was that good enough? He wanted to know. He wanted me to put his mind at ease.

But the truth is, our minds will *never* be at ease as long as we are looking to ourselves, or to our faith, or to what we do, for our salvation. Because man, how can you be sure you really believe? Or that your faith is strong enough? Or, like this man, that you've done or confessed enough? One day maybe you will think you did, but then the next your mind will be plagued with doubts and fears, and then the next you will be striving and struggling to do better, to be stronger, to do even more. For there will always be more - more doubts, more fears, more to do, more to achieve. It's kind of like trying to walk up a down escalator - you'll work awfully hard, but get no where. The steps keep coming . . . you can never do enough.

But St. Paul did not write these verses to give us a new Law to do - a new Law to replace those crusty old Ten Commandments; a new Law for Christians, that *this* is what you have to do now. In fact, *what he's doing here is just the opposite!* He is pointing us away from ourselves and what we do, and saying: Salvation is not by the Law, but is a gift. Salvation comes by what Jesus did, not by what we do. So let not your mind be troubled, and set your heart at ease, for Jesus has done all that is necessary. In Him, you have all that you need. You will always let you down; but He never will. ***Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.***

For to confess **Jesus is Lord** is not to confess a Jesus sitting on a lordly throne in heaven, who needs or demands that you do things for Him. It is to confess Him as Saviour. That the Lord who created all things in the beginning, has now come in the person of Jesus to re-create what we have broken in sin. And that He is still doing that. Still working, still forgiving, still restoring, still saving. For He is the only one who can.

And that is the picture we are given in the Holy Gospel today - the account we hear on the First Sunday in Lent every year: of Jesus being tempted by the devil in the wilderness. Luke tells us that Jesus was **in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil**. Which makes it sound as if the devil was relentless in his tempting, with not just the three temptations we are told about, but after Jesus every day, in all manner of ways. So that as the author to the Hebrews says: *He was tempted in every way, as we are, yet without sin* (Heb 4:15). So that at the end of the forty days, when He was battered and tired and hungry, the devil unleashes his last three and greatest temptations. But the Word of God made flesh cannot be seduced or enticed, and so the devil leaves - not forever - but **until an opportune time**.

And so on this First Sunday in Lent, as **we fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith** (Gradual; Heb 12:2), we see the One who has come to fight for you; to enter the battlefield on your behalf and defeat the enemy who is too much for you. For consider; consider you and Him:

+ You are tempted in the midst of plenty, and want more; Jesus is tempted after 40 days of nothing, yet trusts and desires only the will of His Father.

+ You give your life for your own little worldly kingdom and life of ease; Jesus refuses all the kingdoms of the world, for He sees them for what they are: kingdoms of the world, which will not last.

+ And how often do you want God to prove His love for you by rescuing you from your troubles, from your falls, from your stupidity, and then doubt His love when He does not, or delays, or helps in some other way than you had in mind; Jesus doubts not His Father's love, no matter where He is or what happens to Him.

And so for we who fall - who fall often and fall hard - there is One who has come to stand for us. That while Jesus is certainly an *example* for us here, in how to fight the temptations of the devil with the Word of God, He is *even more* a refuge for us, *A Mighty Fortress*, who has come to do what we could not: face the devil and win. Or as Luther wrote, and as we sang:

With might of ours can naught be done, soon were our loss effected;

But for us fights the valiant One, Whom God Himself elected.

Ask ye, Who is this? Jesus Christ it is. (LSB #656 v.2)

But of course, the fight was not over in the wilderness. The **until an opportune time** came when Jesus was again in a kind of wilderness, alone, hungry, battered and

beaten - as He hung upon the cross. And Satan was at Him again, drumming into His ears those words of doubt: *If you are the Son of God* (Matt 27:40) . . . If, if, if. You don't really know. You can't really know. God wouldn't treat His Son like this . . . But he cannot win. For Jesus knows no "ifs" - the "ifs" of doubt, the "ifs" of false wisdom, the "ifs" of what seems to be, but only the firm and solid foundation of the Word of God. And so after hours of being pummeled in body and in mind, in His soul and in His flesh, by men and by demons, Jesus confesses: **Father** - yes, you are my Father, and I your Son. **Father, into your hands** - yes, your hands, for they are not hard and unloving hands, but merciful and gracious hands. **Father, into your hands I commit my spirit** (Luke 23:46). And the battle is won. Our sin is atoned for. Death has swallowed a victim it cannot hold. And the devil's head is dealt a blow from which he will not recover.

This, St. Paul says, is the way of salvation. That we rely not on our strength, but repent and rely on His strength. That we rely not on our faithfulness, but repent and rely on His faithfulness. That we listen not to the words of the world, but repent and listen to this Word alone. The Word of God made flesh for you.

That word, said St. Paul, **is near you, in your mouth and in your heart**. Yes, the Word that created all things, the Word that defeated the devil, the Word that hung on the cross, the Word that lives and reigns to all eternity - is not far from you, watching you, and seeing how you will do in your battles. No, He **is near you**. How near? **In your heart**, yes, for the Word made flesh, through the water of Holy Baptism, has come to you and created in you a new and clean heart through the forgiveness of your sins. And the Word is **in your mouth**, yes, for the body of the Word made flesh is placed into your mouth and His blood poured over your lips in His Holy Supper. That on the battlefield of your heart, your mind, your body, and your soul, He is fighting for you. Giving you the faith which believes, giving you the words which confess, and giving you the victory of His forgiveness and life.

And so in the battles raging in you and around you, be not troubled or afraid, but be at peace. For on the First Sunday in Lent, we begin our Lenten journey on the right foot - looking not to what we can do this season, but to what our Lord has done, *for us and for our salvation* (Creed). To find not in ourselves, but in Him, our refuge and strength, our joy and our peace. And to come again to the altar of our Lord, the altar where He has promised to be for us, and *taste and see that the Lord is good; that blessed are all who take refuge in Him* (Psalm 34:8).

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.