

1 March 2020  
Lent 1

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Life in the Words and Promises of God”  
Text: Genesis 3:1-21; Matthew 4:1-11; Romans 5:12-19

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

When I was young, I wanted to get some fish and have an aquarium in my room. So I saved my allowance and got a little five gallon tank. And with it I thought I got everything I needed - some gravel for the bottom, a filter and air pump, some plants (I don't remember if they were real or artificial), and even some little plaster things with gaps for the fish to swim through. If I was a fish, I thought, I would like to live there. And I cleaned the algae off the sides of the glass and I fed them. If you were a fish in my tank, life was good.

But what I *didn't* have enough money to buy was a cover for the aquarium. They were expensive. But hey, I thought, what do you need a cover for anyway? Well, I found out one day when my fish wasn't in the aquarium, but on the floor. And it happened more than once. And sometimes the fish was dead, and sometimes I would see it in time to scoop it up and put it back in the water. But I don't know why my fish would jump out of the aquarium. I suppose today Google could tell me the answer. But back then, I was just a boy wondering why my fish were so stupid!

Thinking about it now, I guess they thought they saw something they wanted. Maybe it was a reflection of light, or a bug, or something else. But whatever it was, it *tempted* them to jump out of the water to what was - or what could have been - their death. Because life out of the water, for a fish, means death.

Which is why satan tempts you. Sin is not an end in itself for satan, it is a *means* to an end - to your death. For that's what he wants. To rob you of life now and forever. And he does that by getting you to jump - away from God, away from His life, away from His gifts. And that's what we need to understand at the beginning of this Lenten season - that sin isn't about obedience or disobedience, good or bad, right or wrong. It's about life and death. The life God has for you, and the death satan wants for you.

We heard of it in the first reading today, from Genesis, the account of the first sin. Like the aquarium I got for my fish, God had created a wonderful place for Adam and Eve, and their children, and their children's children, and even us, to live. If you were a person in God's Garden, life was good. But then satan dangled something they thought they wanted, something he said would make their life better, and they jumped. To their deaths. Satan promised but didn't deliver. Life was not better outside the Garden. Now instead of all

goodness, there was sickness and pain, hard toil and division, thorns and thistles, and yes, death. Adam would die. Eve would die. And every child born to them would die.

And this is why - and how - satan tempts you still today. He can't make or force you to do anything. *The devil made me do it* is just an excuse. What he does is dangle things before you, things you think you want, things he promises will make your life better, and tempts you to jump - away from God, away from His life, away from His gifts. Jump to your death. And we take the bait.

*What is it for you?* Maybe rebellion against your parents and other authorities, like teachers and pastors? After all, what do those old-fashioned, backward, worry-wart relics from the past know about life today - and *my* life and what *I'm* going through - anyway? Wouldn't life be better without them and all their stupid rules and restrictions? **Jump! Jump!**

Or maybe for you it's anger or bitterness or hatred in your heart. The thirst for revenge, tit-for-tat, an eye for an eye. No way I'm going to apologize, no way I'm going to forgive, no way I'm going to go to that person who obviously has it in for me and try to work things out. Wouldn't life be better without them, or if you just stayed away from them? Or if you could figure out a way to punish them or hurt them or make them pay? **Jump! Jump!**

Sexual sins are always popular. It can't be wrong if it feels so good, right? And with whoever. Nobody waits until marriage anymore! Everybody does it. My spouse doesn't understand me. Nothing wrong with fantasizing or experimenting or changing. **Jump! Jump!**

What about stuff? Do you need more, bigger, better, to be happy? What if someone else gets what you want? Are you happy for them or angry with God? What about the truth? What do you believe - God's truth or man's truth? And sometimes you just have to lie! **Jump! Jump!**

And there's lots more things we jump at, isn't there? *What is it for you?* Those things you think you want, you think you need, you think will make your life better . . . but it's all a lie, all a deception, all leading to death. Because we're jumping for what God hasn't given us and away from God, away from His life, away from His gifts. Stupid fish!

But here's the good news: *And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day . . . [And] the Lord God called to the man . . .*

God didn't leave Adam and Eve where they jumped; didn't leave them to die. He saved them. He scooped them up and put them back in the water. Not back into the Garden, but **back into the water of His Word and promises**. So they could live. Because only in God and His Word and promises is there life. Outside of Him there is only death now and death forever.

So first God promised, and then the *second* Adam came. To save. To scoop us up. To make things right again. A second sinless man to undo what the first one did. To fulfill all the words and promises of God and die our death that we have His life. That *just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin . . . so too would the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.* That *as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.*

So Jesus came. Into the wilderness into which we jumped. The wilderness caused by our rebellion against God and His life. The Spirit led Him there, we heard. To do battle. To engage the tempter. And not as God only, but as one of us, as a man. And not in the strength of plenty, but alone, and after 40 days and 40 nights of fasting. Of nothingness.

And He was not disappointed. The tempter came and dangled before Jesus food and fame and glory. **Jump! Jump!** Real temptations. To not trust His Father to provide and care but take for Himself and take care of Himself. **Jump!** To not trust in His Father's time and way but take matters into His own hands. **Jump!** To not believe that what His Father said is good, but look for another good, another way. **Jump! Jump!**

But there would be no jumping out of God's Word and promises for Jesus. For Jesus didn't just quote them, He lived in them. He was them. To jump out of them would be to deny who He is and His Father, which would be sure and certain death. That He could not do. That He *would* not do.

Even on the cross. Even there, hanging *with* our sin, hanging *for* our sin, and dying our death, when it looked like the Word and promises of God were useless and weak, null and void, empty and broken. Even there, Jesus lives in the Word and promises of God. **Jump! Jump!** they yelled at Him there, too. But still He would not jump. He would not jump down from the cross. He trusts, He believes, even in the darkness.

And so He lives even though He dies. He rises from death. He ascends into heaven. He believes and fulfills all the Words and promises of God. They are life. For Him *and for us.*

*For us,* for now He who didn't jump, but died and rose and lives again, comes to scoop us up and put us back into the Word and promises of God. And for us, it *is* back into the water - back into the water of our Baptism. The water of forgiveness. The water of adoption. The water of promise and life. He saves us from a sure and certain death and gives us life again. Life, every time we jump in search of happiness, fulfillment, pleasure, or some other empty promise of satan, and find ourselves dried out and baking in the sin we thought would give us what we wanted. It doesn't. It can't. Only the water can. The water of Jesus' life, love, and forgiveness.

And put back in the water, we not only receive these things, we give them, too. The life, love, and forgiveness we're given, we now give. Not rebelling but submitting. Not plotting

revenge but working good. Sticking by our spouse. Believing the Word of our Father rather than the opinions of the world and speaking this truth. Caring, praying, giving. For in the water is where faith is given and love is lived. The water where we have all we need and live in the joy of being what God created us to be. Finding in him alone what we've been wrongly jumping at. It was here for us all along.

As is that *other* tree of the Garden that Adam and Eve jumped away from - the Tree of Life. Here for us . . .

*Now from the tree of Jesus' shame  
Flows life eternal in His name;  
For all who trust and will believe,  
Salvation's living fruit receive.  
And of this fruit so pure and sweet  
The Lord invites the world to eat,  
To find within this cross of wood  
The tree of life with every good* (LSB #561 v. 4).

So come and eat. Whatever satan is dangling before you and saying ***Jump! Jump!*** - whatever it is, you have what is better here. Satan will leave you high and dry, gasping for breath, dying, and hopeless. But here is life. The Body and Blood of your Saviour. The one who came to scoop you up and save you. Come and eat. His forgiveness and life. He is every good and only good. He has life for you.

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.

*Thanks to Chad Bird whose illustration of water and fish gave me the framework for the thoughts I wanted to include in this sermon.*