

**Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent, Year A, 10.ii.2008, 10:00 a.m.
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania
Holy Eucharist, ELW Setting 5
Genesis 2:15-17;3:1-7; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11**

J. J. !

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was
and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

**Again, the devil took him to a very high
mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of
the world and their splendor; and he said to
him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall
down and worship me." Jesus said to him,
"Away with you, Satan! For it is written,
'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only
Him.'"**

-- Matthew 4:8-10

Our Confirmands have just completed their first unit on the
Ten Commandments as these are recorded in the Books of
Exodus and Deuteronomy and in the First Chief Part of
Martin Luther's *Small Catechism*. In that unit, they learned

to distinguish between the ‘Two Tables of the Law,’ Commandments 1-3 which pertain to our relationship with God, and Commandments 4-10 which pertain to our relationship with others in society. Of all the Commandments, our Confirmands have learned that it is the *First* Commandment which underlies all of the others, and that it is the *First* Commandment that is the most difficult to keep: “You shall have *no* other Gods before me” or, as Our Lord rewords it in today’s Gospel, “Worship the LORD your God, and serve *only* Him.”

With only four candidates left running for the presidential nomination of the two establishment parties, the promises each makes on the campaign trail is going to have to be more closely formulated so as to point up each candidate’s difference from the competition while still appealing to the party faithful who have yet to vote in a

state primary or caucus and yet to contribute to the maximum of \$2,000. Foreign policy will be, of course, crucial in the coming election. What a coup it would be for one of the candidates to be able to state with absolute confidence and conviction, 'If you vote for me, if you contribute to my campaign, I will place our nation in a position to dictate terms of peace to our enemies, in a position to secure our borders against unwanted intruders, in a position to dictate the terms of international trade and even the price of crude oil and natural gas. On that you have my promise and my word of honor.' And the people would follow such a politician, except for one self-evident fact: No one and no nation on earth has such power, as much as they might desire it, as much as they might be willing to do a deal with the Devil himself in order to wield such power.

The third temptation of Christ according to Saint Matthew is interesting both because of what it implies and because of Our Lord's response to the Tempter. Satan promises Jesus dominion over "all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor." *And Jesus does not question the Tempter's right to give them.* That is, the Gospel acknowledges that the whole worldly order belongs to the Devil. All the kingdoms, national establishments or empires of the world built by seizing power and maintained by dominating all who would question that power are the Devil's to give, for they belong to him. All those powers that hold on to power by enslaving others, all those powers that hold onto wealth by oppressing the poor, all those powers that claim to protect the fatherland, the motherland, the homeland by sending the young off to war to kill the soldiers and inhabitants of other fatherlands, motherlands

and homelands serve the Prince of darkness who delights in slavery, injustice and war without end. And so, insofar as they serve no master, ideal or cause higher than themselves, the kingdoms of the earth and all their splendor are Satan's to give.

What a boon for God and the cause of God in the world it would have been for Our Lord to have accepted Satan's offer, in return for just one act of worship. No longer could atheists and agnostics point to the absence or apparent impotence of God in view of human degradation in the form of poverty, abuse of every sort, theft of the workers' labor by those who produce nothing but money, the war-mongering profiteers, the armies of slaves and workers thrown into endless warfare against each other, the widowed and orphaned millions, generation after cursed generation, chaos on earth as though no one were home in

Heaven, or ever had been. Had Jesus simply worshipped the power of evil behind all the darkness of human history, perhaps He could have brought peace, justice and mercy to the world, or at least its appearance. Perhaps, had the Beloved Son given in to only this one, final temptation, he could have protected His Heavenly Father from the accusations of the whole world, from the blood of the innocent that cries out to Heaven for vengeance but hears no reply.

That alone would have been temptation enough for the One Who came into the world to proclaim and bring the Kingdom of God. And how many countless of us sinners, ordained to the Apostolic ministry of Christ's Church, would give almost anything at times to defend God against those who place themselves in judgment over God by just one unassailable, air-tight argument that would settle the

matter forever! Dietrich Bonhoeffer described this as the “high spiritual temptation” not only of Christ but of all the Disciples of Christ (*Lectures on ‘Creation & Fall—Temptation,’* Berlin: 1933). Such temptation is experienced not by theologians only, but by all those who are tempted to seek endlessly for just the right philosophical world-view, for just the right political ideology as a means of gaining dominion over the powers of the world by understanding and analyzing those powers.

Our Lord does not succumb to this ‘high spiritual temptation,’ nor does He argue with the Tempter:

Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him.'"

Our Lord does not choose the way of hollow promises or air-tight arguments, even if this might mean being able to

defend God against all the accusations of the world. Instead, He clings to His Heavenly Father and to God's First Commandment. In doing this, not only as True God but also and always as True Human Being, Jesus clears a path forward for us, a path out of the entangled darkness of this world and its many kingdoms, principalities and powers, a path back toward the freedom of being the sons and daughters of God we were created to be.

Jesus Christ does not make campaign promises to right all the wrongs caused by humankind. Instead, Jesus the Anointed Son of His Heavenly Father brings the *real* Kingdom of righteousness and peace into this world now, a Kingdom in which human beings can live, a Kingdom out of which men and women can live in their encounter and interaction with the structures of this world. It is His Father's Kingdom alone that He promises us, and it is for

Him to invite us into it by the Father's Holy Spirit, the only One Who can really change the course of history, the One Who is creating and new world wherever justice, mercy and peace take root and flourish as they were intended to do from the beginning of all things. As you receive Him into your body at this Holy Eucharist, be received in your soul by Him into that Kingdom which is eternal and rejoice in that as your true fatherland, motherland and homeland, secure in the Father's everlasting love! ✠ Amen.



Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. ✠ Amen.

S. D. G.!