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Sermon Series: *Advent's Adverbs, No. 7*

**Victoriously**

January 8, 2023

**Matthew 4:1-11 (NIV)**

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. <sup>3</sup> The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

<sup>4</sup> Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

<sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. <sup>6</sup> "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

<sup>7</sup> Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

<sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. <sup>9</sup> "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

<sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

<sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

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You're welcome to join me in the text that was just read for us: Matthew's gospel, the fourth chapter.

By the Church calendar, today is Epiphany Sunday – the traditional Sunday when we remember how the magi – those astronomers or professors, the wise men from the East – arrived in Bethlehem to honor Jesus, whom their study of the skies revealed to be the new King of the Jews.

In their coming, however, they also predicted how, remarkably, *gentiles* or non-Jews would go on to receive Jesus far more readily than would Jesus' own people.

The Jews were so blind to Jesus that most of them wouldn't walk across the street to honor Him.

But these gentiles, the wise men from the East, traveled across the known world to honor the Savior, and though they may not have understood perfectly all that Jesus was about, it's clear that God was in their travels. He led them to the Savior, and then He led them safely away from Him, avoiding King Herod's evil intentions.

He did the same for Jesus and His parents, Joseph and Mary.

For the sake of the world's salvation, God not only sent His Son, He also protected Him while He was here on earth by sending Him and His parents out of Bethlehem and on to Egypt because of King Herod's jealousy and rage.

And then, ultimately, God led them back to Israel so they could settle in Nazareth.

And you know, just as God's guiding hand can be seen throughout those troubled days, so will God make Himself evident in the lives of those today who, like Mary and Joseph and the Magi, will see Him and hear Him and follow Him.

Even if we don't understand why this or that might happen, still, if our eyes and ears are open to God and if we'll be teachable and leadable people, God will guide us through the troubles to success – to *victory* – and specifically, to victory over enemies.

Enemies: like Herod to the Magi and to Jesus and Joseph and Mary;

Enemies: like Pharaoh to Moses and the Israelites in Egypt;

Enemies: like the Philistines to the Jews;

Enemies: like the Jewish leaders to the Apostles;

And enemies like Satan to Jesus, and as Satan *still is today* – to us all.

Last week we talked about Jesus' willingness to be baptized, even if for no other reason than simply to please God, His Father. He followed the leading of His Heavenly Father *willingly*.

And it was right after John baptized Jesus and God's Spirit somehow visibly descended upon Him, that Jesus was led out into the wilderness to be tested.

It's been said that if the baptism event was Jesus' *public* initiation into God's ministry, then the time in the wilderness was Jesus' *private* initiation – His private time of preparation for doing what God had in mind for Him to do.

Someone once asked Martin Luther, 'What is the most important preparation a person needs in order to successfully, victoriously accomplish the will of God?'

Luther answered, "Temptation."

"OK," they replied, "but then what is the second most important preparation?"

Luther replied, "Temptation – it's the first, second, third and fourth."<sup>1</sup>

Of course, other things are important too, but as Luther understood, temptation is critical because only that which is tested and tempered can bear the strain.

Verse 1 clearly tells us that it was, maybe surprisingly, God's Spirit who led Jesus to the place of testing.

Why would God do that to Jesus? Because God knew the weakness of humanity – even the human part of Jesus, and as God's character of goodness attests, He never asks something of us that He does not prepare and empower us to accomplish.

God does not set people up for failure. He offers us all we need to succeed at whatever He asks us to do, even though His preparatory work in us can be tough at times.

Tough like this passage, when He allowed Jesus to experience, in the wilderness at the hand of Satan (man's

<sup>1</sup> Earle, Ralph. *The Wesleyan Bible Commentary-Matthew*. Eerdmans. 1964. p.24.

mortal enemy), all the temptations that would and could ever be known by humanity.

Hebrews 4:15 spells that out: *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin.*

Why? Because Jesus would have to be subjected to every sort of temptation that you and I would face, and He would have to overcome them, if He would be our savior – our Messiah.

In the calling God gave Him, Jesus would experience the constant and intense opposition of His enemies.

He would be lied about and misrepresented.

He would be consistently misunderstood and resisted.

He would be rejected – by even His closest friends.

There in the wilderness, this was the weight training, the testing, that would prepare Him for a victorious future – in spite of all that that future would bring.

This was the time of testing that He had to pass.

And, praise the Lord, that is exactly what He did. Jesus passed every test, so that not only could He claim victory over the enemy, but so that, in Him, you and I can as well.

So, how did Jesus do it? How did He overcome the temptations and pass the tests so that He, and we, could live victoriously?

Let me mention quickly here a couple specific ways:

First, Jesus did not enter into any sort of game or negotiation or deal with the enemy. He did not waste time debating or discussing the situation with him. This, of course, was the primary problem in the case of not only Adam and Eve's failure, but also the failure of the nation of Israel: failure to become what God created and intended both of them to be.

In the case of both Eden and Israel, there was too much discussion: too much listening to and toying with evil; too much dancing along the cliffs of destruction.

The greatest lie of the enemy we can ever believe is that we can engage Him casually or even carelessly.

We can so easily be convinced, just as Adam and Eve were – just as Israel was. We can so easily believe that the influence of evil is not really as dangerous as all that, that we can manage it, and that we can control it if we open ourselves to it only just a bit.

Jesus knew otherwise.

If you engage and debate and toy with the devil, if you think him weak and harmless, then please understand: it's just a matter of time before he takes you down.

Jesus did not toy with the devil. Jesus took the danger to be as serious as it was.

That's first.

Second, Jesus answered the devil's suggestions, not with His own creativity or wit, but with the very word of God.

Jesus knew God's will well, because He knew God's word well, and so when the test came to do something contrary to it, Jesus responded by reflex – according to that deep-seated knowledge.

When you're a swimmer and you dive into water, you don't have to think about how to swim. You just do, because you're so familiar with doing it.

When you're a medical person, a doctor or nurse or EMT, and you see someone in cardiac arrest, you don't have to read up on how to do CPR. You just do it by impulse.

Jesus knew His Father's word and will so well that He could spot a lie a mile away. So, there was no drama needed – no need to think it through.

When confronted with a lie, Jesus rejected it by the word of God.

How well do we know God's word? How much have we studied it, really – how much committed to memory?

Isn't not knowing – not being sure or convinced of God's will and way – one of the biggest reasons we get into messes that hurt ourselves and others?

Isn't that why so much of the world today not only suffers pain but also inflicts pain on others? Because it doesn't know, doesn't understand, how God made this world to work?

Jesus was so familiar with God's word and way that both flowed out of Him without hesitation, and that's one reason He came through testing victoriously: He immediately recognized and rejected the enemy's lies.

And what were the lies Satan tried to sell Jesus?

Oh, they're common. He still tries to grab people with them today.

The *first lie* was the suggestion that Jesus should not trust God to provide the necessities of life.

Jesus had apparently given Himself completely into God's care out there, and since it had been forty days since He'd eaten, the temptation was to consider that maybe God really isn't able to be trusted.

"Why wait for God to provide when you can just take what you need now? Yes, you said you'd wait for God in this, but He's not showing up, so use the power that you have to deal with this."

To the world, you see, at this point Jesus would seem weak and defeated and impotent.

But God had a purpose for this.

Trusting God in this way allowed Jesus to become one with those of our world who are, even today, hungry and homeless and powerless, with those who are sick and compromised and weak, with those who live not knowing when their next meal or shelter will come to them because they have no resources in which to trust.

This isn't about just sitting back and letting God drop things in our laps.

This is about placing our ultimate trust in God and *not* in our own abilities and resources.

Knowing that God will provide in His way and time and measure, that relationship of ongoing trust: that is what really brings life to us.

That's what Jesus meant when He responds there in verse 4, "*We don't live on bread alone. We live on every word that comes from the mouth of God.*"

Trusting God and His goodness will sustain us far longer than any piece of bread we might grab for ourselves.

The *second lie* Satan tries to sell to Jesus is that God exists for us to use to do our bidding—like some cosmic vending machine. Satan even used Scripture to bolster his suggestion. See verses 5 and 6.

Jesus' response is that God cannot be manipulated. God is not there to cater to our wishes and whims.

Later on, the Pharisees would demand that Jesus give them a sign as to who He was. And Jesus answered them the same way He answers Satan here, that to really know God is to understand that God reveals Himself in His own time and in a way that pleases Him (Matthew 16:1-4, interpreted).

Ah, the temptation to manipulate God—to tell God what to do! We're so susceptible to that when we run up against something hard in life and God doesn't respond when or in the manner we'd prefer.

We throw it back in His face and demand of Him, "So, you're God huh? Where are you now? Where are you in this?! If you're God, then why don't you \_\_\_\_?" And we fill in the blank with what it is we want or think best or think we deserve.

Now, God works in ways and He allows things we don't understand. He can handle our questions about that. Even today, we have questions about why this or that has happened in our lives.

God can handle our questions in moments of confusion or hurt.

But here's the thing: we will never be able to serve a God that we, deep in our hearts, fully expect to serve us.

We have to get that straight in order to be followers of Jesus. Jesus had it straight, and He overcame the temptation to think that He on earth was wiser or more loving or more compassionate or more timely than God is.

He answered Satan, again right out of Scripture—right out of Deuteronomy 6: "***Do not put the Lord your God to the test.***"<sup>1</sup>

"God is there to do what *we* want."

That's the enemy's *second lie* that Jesus rejects.

The *third lie* with which Satan tempts Jesus is the most stark. Really, he actually unmasks himself and puts it all on the table with this appeal to the allure of power.

Satan offers all the earthly power he possesses to those who will worship him—to those who will give themselves for his purposes.

Many have given in to this temptation, because they have only considered the here and now.

That's why the eternal perspective is so very important to remember.

If we ever needed the reminder, the last week in our church family should have reminded us: life is not just about the here and now. Life is, ultimately, about eternity.

Do we give in to Satan's offer of present power, or do we choose the way of the God of eternity?

Do we store up for ourselves treasure for these few earthly years, or do we store up that which is of eternal value?

Do we serve the god of earth or the God of forever?

They're not the same and we can't serve them both.

We have to choose. That was Satan's ultimatum to Jesus here, but Jesus declared, again from Deuteronomy, "***Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'***"<sup>2</sup>

Jesus knew how foolish it would be to give up the eternal for the sake of the earthly—to give up forever to gain the momentary.

It's like those immortal words missionary Jim Elliot wrote in his journal in 1949, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Though we are tempted, just as Jesus was, we must ***never choose the temporary over the eternal.***

In all this, Jesus demonstrates how to live victoriously:

First, do not toy with the devil. Do not give evil any opportunity in our lives.

Second, learn God's word and way such that it comes out of us automatically—as a reflex.

Third, do not fall for Satan's lies, and specifically the lies that say:

"God cannot be trusted to take care of us so we must care for ourselves." Jesus says, "No, God is trustworthy to care for us."

"God is there to do what *we* want." Jesus says, "No, God cannot be manipulated."

"It's worth our while to reject God and serve the devil." Jesus says, "No, it's always foolish to choose the temporary over the eternal."

With these few principles, Jesus gained a victory in the wilderness that not only allowed Him to live and serve God, the Father, victoriously, but also allows you and me to do the same.

Jesus offers Himself and His power, through His Spirit, to *you* and to *me* and to *any* who will join Him in rejecting the enemy and his lies, and declaring even today, "I choose here and now to follow Jesus and to live victoriously as a servant and child of God."

We can make that choice—that determination, and in the power of God's Spirit, we can do it—we can keep it.

Will you so choose?

In this new year:

Will you see the temptations of the devil for what they are and take them seriously?

Will you commit yourself to knowing God's word and will?

Will you reject the enemy's temptations of provision, manipulation and power?

Will you choose the way of Jesus?

I hope you will.

He hopes you will.

He died so that you might.

<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 6:16

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 6:13

Closing Prayer

Closing Song: *Jesus, I My Cross My Taken*

Benediction:

You can tell the truth of this passage because, in all the ages before and since, these are the very things every false messiah, from cult to government to self, has offered: bread and provision, miracles and manipulations, and personal power.

And so many fall right into those temptations, and they wind up suffering the disappointment and destruction they bring.

*Jesus* did *not*, and because *He* did not, *we* need not. We can trust God faithfully because of Jesus.

Do you remember that story that Jesus told in Matthew 12 about one not being able to enter a strong man's house and taking his possessions without first disabling the strong man?"

That's exactly what Jesus did in the wilderness – He disabled the strong man for us: to redeem us from Satan's power and to give us the opportunity for a tremendous future – if we will choose Jesus, and then choose as Jesus chose.

May the Lord help us to so choose, and by the power of His Spirit to go on to do all God has for us to do – *victoriously* – for His glory.