

# Lent 1

March 1, 2020

Pastor Zachary Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church  
Pasadena, California

“Did God really call you beloved?” asks Satan of Jesus in the wilderness. Right before Jesus had been fasting for 40 days and 40 nights, and right before he had been led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit, Jesus was at the Jordan River being baptized by John. When Jesus came up from the water, the heavens were opened and the Spirit, like a dove, descended upon him. Then, a voice from heaven rang out proclaiming: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (NRSV Matthew 3:17)

But now, Jesus is in the tempter’s court. Here, in the wilderness Satan examines Jesus and puts him to the test. “If you truly are who you say you are; if God really called you beloved; if you are truly the ‘Son of God,’ then prove it. Turn these stones into loaves of bread. After all, I bet you’re quite hungry. God wouldn’t want you to die of hunger, if you are so beloved, right?”

This is the first thing the tempters and testers of this world try to do to us. Our identity, the core of our being is grounded in the understanding that we are God’s beloved. Yet, the minute we claim that, the very minute we start to live in a way that reflects this identity, the world comes to fill us with doubts and tries to tempt us away. Often the voice of the tempter tries to convince us that we don’t need God or the faith community; that we should put our trust in material goods; that success is only measured in fame and fortune; that we should fear those who look and act differently from us; that security only comes through power and force; and most troublesome—we are unworthy to be loved by God or by others, that we are nothing but scum of the earth.

But Jesus is in full communal relationship with God along with the Holy Spirit. This gives Jesus the ability to fully trust in the love that God has for him. And so, even though Satan tries three times to tempt Jesus—first with hunger, then with empty glory, and third with power—Jesus is able to drive Satan back with the power of God’s word. In proclaiming that word, Jesus reminds Satan that God’s love cannot be overcome, and what God declares has more power behind it than anything in this world.

Our gospel story today, on this first Sunday in Lent, is a reminder to us that when the world tries really hard to turn us away from our true identity—Beloved child of God, we have the gift

Pastor Zachary Johnson



Hill Ave Grace  
Lutheran Church



of Jesus to show us how to continue living the way God desires for us. Jesus is there to remind us that when the tempters and testers try and use their slyness and cunning, God's word is there to keep us true. As we will sing in our hymn of the day, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* (Evangelical Lutheran Worship #504): "Though hordes of devils fill the land all threatening to devour us, we tremble not, unmoved we stand, they cannot overpower us...God's judgment must prevail! One little word subdues him!" That one little word is God's word.

Satan tried to convince Jesus to abuse his divine power by turning stones into bread. Jesus subdued Satan with God's word: "One does not live by bread alone..." (NRSV Matthew 4:4) Satan tried to convince Jesus to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple. Jesus again subdued him with the word: "Do not put the Lord, your God to the test." (NRSV Matthew 4:7) Even when presented with all the kingdoms of the world, promising more power than any human has ever possessed, Jesus went back to God's word: "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him!" (NRSV Matthew 4:10)

Part of our Lent journey is to ground ourselves in the promise of Jesus Christ found in the proclamation of God's word. No matter how the world changes, no matter how society changes, God's word forever abides. This ancient text still has the ability to speak to us today, tomorrow, next week, months from now, and years from now. Its overarching message never changes. Sure, how we interpret that message in our daily lives might change, but what never changes is the proclamation God makes to us through Jesus on the cross. A proclamation that promises us that not even the powers of evil, no one sin, and not even death can take away God's claim that we are beloved children of God.

And even though we will face plenty of tempters and testers in our lives, God has promised that there will be plenty of means of grace to remind us of the truth of God's word. Sometimes that grace will come when God proclaims to us, "Your sins are forgiven." Sometimes that grace will come from the feeling of fresh water on our foreheads as we make the sign of the cross with the water from the baptismal font. This grace will always be available to us in the bread of life and cup of salvation that we partake in at the table. But this grace can also come through the prayers of others; Bible studies and devotions; spending time in prayer with God; and loving and serving people in need in our community.

All of these means of grace point us back to the promise found in God's word—we are God's beloved, and God will do anything to be in eternal relationship with us, even sacrificing God's own life.

God will continue to free us from tempters and testers, and in return we are free to go out into the world and speak or show the truth of God's love to others, so that they too may come to

**Pastor Zachary Johnson**



**Hill Ave Grace**  
Lutheran Church



**73 N. Hill Avenue • Pasadena, CA 91106 • 626-792-4169 • [www.hillavenuegrace.org](http://www.hillavenuegrace.org)**

know that God's word forever shall abide, and that God's word cannot be overcome by the brokenness of this world. So, how might you go out and let people know they are God's beloved?

Amen.

**Pastor Zachary Johnson**



**Hill Ave Grace**  
Lutheran Church



Centennial Celebration 1919-2019

**73 N. Hill Avenue • Pasadena, CA 91106 • 626-792-4169 • [www.hillavenuegrace.org](http://www.hillavenuegrace.org)**