

HE NEVER SAW IT COMING!
Luke 4:1-13 and Romans 10:5-13

Spring training! It's time for baseball again! My Cincinnati Reds are 7-6... hopefully not a herald of a mediocre to come... Perhaps closer to home, The Chicago Cubs are 10-3 so far in Spring Training! That's the best of all 30 Major League teams so far! Could this be another 2016? We can only hope! When it comes to the devil and his minions—at least before the coming of Christ, his record was perfect—he was batting 1.000—it must have seemed as if he held absolute, unbroken control. Think about it: from the time of Adam and Eve up until Jesus' birth, he had everyone in his grip.

It seemed as if no one could resist. Every soul faced trials, and every soul, in some way, faltered. The forces of darkness, it seemed, had a perfect record. They outmaneuvered, outsmarted, and outlasted. Some fell quickly, others gradually, and some were even deceived without realizing it. Those unseen victories, the subtle corruptions, perhaps seemed the most triumphant. As the hymn writer put it:

- 1 *All mankind fell in Adam's fall;
One common sin infects us all.
From one to all the curse descends,
And over all God's wrath impends.*
- 2 *Through all our pow'rs corruption creeps
And us in dreadful bondage keeps;
In guilt we draw our infant breath
And reap its fruits of woe and death.*
- 3 *From hearts depraved, to evil prone,
Flow thoughts and deeds of sin alone;
God's image lost, the darkened soul
Seeks not nor finds its heav'nly goal.*

It was a streak, a relentless winning streak that surely seemed destined to continue... So, when Jesus walked among us, why would anyone, especially the forces of darkness, expect anything different? "Oh, He's the Son of God," we might say. But to the forces of evil, that was just another challenge. They thought, "We'll get Him. We'll outsmart Him, outlast Him, and outmaneuver Him, just like all the others." Maybe it would take time, maybe a carefully laid trap, but they were confident they'd find His weakness.

After all, this Son of God was now in human form—weak, vulnerable, flesh and blood. That, they believed, would be His undoing. They were so certain of their unbroken record, so sure that they'd remain undefeated. But what's that old proverb? **"Pride goes before the fall"** (Prov.16:18)?

And then, an opportunity presented itself. Jesus, alone in the wilderness. No comforting dove, no resounding voice from heaven, no supportive crowds. Just Jesus, alone. The Prince of Life vs. the Prince of Death. The Prince of Light vs. the Prince of Darkness.

This, they thought, was their moment. If the forces of darkness, consumed by hate, could ever experience joy, this would have been it. This was their chance.

And the opportunity seemed even sweeter. Jesus, in His human form, was weakened by forty days of fasting. The devil always attacks where we're most vulnerable—when we're at our weakest. Time to tempt a hungry man with the promise of food. It seemed like child's play—like a guaranteed victory. Another mark in the devil's "win column"—like taking candy from a baby!

But Jesus proved a worthy adversary. "Man shall not live by bread alone." Well played, Jesus! But Satan is undeterred. An unbroken record over countless generations breeds a certain confidence, a sense of invincibility after all! So, they shifted tactics, opting for something more subtle.

"Jesus came to save this world?" thought the evil one. Yes, that's it! Savior! I'll just give it to him! How can he resist? Here you go Jesus! Here's an offer you can't refuse! Free! And Painless! No cross involved! I'll give it to you the world. It's mine, but I don't really want it anyway. Just acknowledge me as the giver, accept it as my gift, and you can have it all. Why make this harder than it has to be?

And again, a puzzling response. Jesus wouldn't yield. ***"You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve."*** He was as determined as any other human, but with a different kind of stubbornness. Where others were stubbornly entrenched in sin, Jesus was steadfast in the Word.

Jesus didn't fall for that one either. "Alright," the devil thought, "if it's the Word He wants, it's the Word He'll get." If He wants to rely on His Father, let Him rely on His Father. "Step off, Jesus. Trust your Father. He'll protect you, send His angels, and take care of you. He promised, didn't He? Surely, you believe His Word?"

"You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." And for a fleeting moment, it was the evil one, not Jesus, who felt uncertain, thrown off balance. In the devil's playbook, turnabout was never fair. So, he retreated, but only temporarily—only ***until an opportune time***. The game was far from over. As famed Yankee catcher Yogi Berra said, "It ain't over 'till it's over!" He hadn't remained undefeated by giving up easily. He would return, and he was certain Jesus would fall.

But Jesus didn't fall. How many more opportunities were there? How many unseen temptations and trials did He face? Who knows? But surely there were many. He'd even use Jesus' dear friend, Peter to tempt Jesus to avoid the cross! The forces of darkness are relentless. Their unbroken record was not something they'd surrender lightly. Trillions of victories and a single defeat might sound acceptable to you and me, but they knew that if that defeat was Jesus, all those other victories would become meaningless. Jesus would erase them all. Those past triumphs were fleeting, but this battle was the one that truly mattered.

Because they knew, deep down, that losing this battle, losing to Jesus, would unleash the Word they despised above all others. A word they'd banished from their vocabulary, forbidden to be spoken in their presence: **forgiveness**.

And yet, Jesus stood firm. He didn't stumble in the wilderness, he didn't falter on the cross, not even for a fleeting moment. Satan tried everything – to outsmart him, to outlast him, to outmaneuver him – but he couldn't. The perfect **Lamb of God**, was willingly sacrificed on the altar of the cross, then rose in glorious triumph from the dead. Think of it: forgiveness flooding a world choked by sin, life breaking into a world of death... salvation shining like a beacon in a world held captive by defeat.

There's only one truly undefeated, and it's not the devil. It is our brother, Jesus whom we believe with all our hearts and whom we confess with our mouths. Him who saves us all.

Because we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ our Lord, or come to Him—that victory doesn't come from our own reason or strength. We're no match for the devil. As we sang at the beginning of our service:

*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,
Of Sabaoth Lord,
And there's none other God;
He holds the field forever.*

Cling to this truth. If we try to face the forces of darkness on our own, we'll inevitably fall. We're simply not strong enough, not wise enough. That doesn't mean we don't engage in the struggle! We absolutely do. When temptation assaults us, when we're lured into doubt, hatred, greed, dishonesty, or any of the countless ways the devil tries to separate us from God—we must resist! We are part of a resistance! Lent reminds us that we are in a battle.

But we don't fight with our own meager strength. We fight with the Word of God and with prayer. And when, inevitably, we stumble and fall, we remember that the Valiant One is on our side. He did not fall. He wins for us, and He wins us. We are the object of God's love and forgiveness which all the hordes of hell despise... which makes us at once God's beloved sons and daughters and at the very same time, enemies of the devil in this cosmic battle.

In fact, every time that word “forgiven” is spoken (as in “I forgive you!”)—here in church, in our homes, at our workplaces, among our neighbors and friends—every time it rings out, the forces of darkness don’t see their countless victories. They see only that one defeat, that one moment they couldn’t overcome, that one time they were brought low. And it fills them with complete hatred.

The words, “You are forgiven” are the direct opposite of everything the devil represents. It’s the one truth they urgently want to silence. And so, it’s the one truth we must continually hear, speak, and proclaim to the world. We must not only believe in our hearts that Jesus is our Savior and forgiver, but we must also declare it with our voices. His forgiveness is for us, and for all. As St. Paul, in our Epistle reminds us, “**...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.**” The devil can’t touch you!

And then, consider the incredible reach of God’s grace. He placed His forgiveness in the most ordinary, widespread elements of our world: water, bread, and wine. Wherever there is water—three fourth’s of the earth is covered with it!—there is a place for forgiveness, because when combined with God’s Word... God offers a washing of new birth in the Holy Spirit. And wherever there is bread and wine, there is a place for forgiveness, because combined with God’s Word, our Lord offers us the very Body and Blood of Jesus, the bread of life for us and for our salvation.

There is no rest for the forces of darkness, no escape when Christians everywhere are speaking forgiveness, pouring forgiveness, eating forgiveness, living forgiveness, and rejoicing in forgiveness! It’s enough to drive them mad. So, the next time temptation whispers in your ear, urging you to withhold forgiveness, don’t dwell on whether someone “deserves” it or whether you “feel” like forgiving. Just forgive them! It will drive the forces of darkness absolutely crazy! Forgive them and declare, “Look! That big, fat ONE in your loss column, Satan! It’s back to haunt you again!”

Of course, they’ll rage against you for that. They’ll attack with renewed fury, but they can’t win. Because they’ve already lost. That “big, fat ONE” in their loss column stands as a monument—a big, empty tomb—proving that life, not death, has the final say. That Jesus, not Satan and all the forces of darkness, has the final word with you. And that word is not condemnation, but **forgiveness**. It’s the word that brings pain to the forces of darkness, the word that defeats them, and the word that brings us life... and immeasurable joy.

- 1 *All mankind fell in Adam’s fall;
One common sin infects us all.
From one to all the curse descends,
And over all God’s wrath impends.*

- 4 *But Christ, the second Adam, came
To bear our sin and woe and shame,
To be our life, our light, our way,
Our only hope, our only stay.*
- 5 *As by one man all mankind fell
And, born in sin, was doomed to hell,
So by one Man, who took our place,
We all were justified by grace.*

In the name of Jesus, Amen.