THE CONQUEST OF SATAN

1. Jesus conquered Satan for us
2. Jesus continues through his ministry

Satan had made his conquest of the human race over 4000 years earlier. The human race lost and they were without excuse. Sure, they were a bit naïve. How could Adam and Eve know they had to be on the lookout for talking snakes? But the command was simple: Do not eat the fruit of that tree. And why should they? They lived in a beautiful garden, with hundreds of trees to choose from, maybe thousands. They had a loving, caring God. But they lost, and because of their rebellion the world was cursed.

Jesus came to undo that curse and to conquer the conqueror, Satan. He did it, not in a garden, but in a desert. The Bible literally says: The Spirit drove him out into the desert. Not that Jesus was unwilling and had to be forced. But this is a battle he had to fight alone, in the desert. And perhaps that word drove out shows determination for Jesus’ encounter. Jesus did not go out there dragging his feet, thinking, I don’t really want to do this or I’m not sure I should be doing this.

Sometimes we are like that, aren’t we? If there is an unpleasant task, a confrontation we need to make but we do not want to, maybe we drive around the block a few times until finally we say: OK, I guess I have to knock on that door or make that phone call. Not Jesus, though. The Spirit literally whisked him right out there into the desert where Satan would be waiting for him. It is like the young man David going out against Goliath. Remember the Bible says: David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him. That is how Jesus was driven out to battle Satan.

But how do you battle Satan? Well, if I were God, I guess I would just use my almighty power and destroy Satan forever. Why mess around? Why take the chance that Satan could do any more damage? Think about it, and think what a strange thing Mark records when he writes: and he was in the desert 40 days, being tempted by Satan. Wait a minute – who is calling the shots here? Isn’t Jesus the Ruler and the Judge? Shouldn’t he be doing the testing and interrogating? Instead, it sounds as if Satan is in the driver’s seat. He is choosing the temptations. But this is how it has to be. Satan undermined Adam and Eve with a temptation and took control of the human race. Jesus comes as the second representative of the human race, to do it right. And in order to do it, he has to resist temptation. He has to actively obey the will of his Father.

This went on for 40 days - a common number in the Bible for a time of testing. He was with the wild animals, Mark says. There were not any of those around when Adam and Eve fell into sin; there were just tame animals in the Garden of Eden. But since the fall into sin, the animals had gone wild and garden had been replaced by desert. Jesus was not given the luxury of encountering Satan in a beautiful garden with house pets. He was given every handicap imaginable in order
to leave no doubt that his conquest of Satan was complete.

This had to be a comfort for the original readers of Mark’s Gospel. Mark wrote this to Christians in Rome who were being persecuted, who would often be thrown into the Coliseum and have wild animals turned loose on them. What a comfort for them to read that their Savior, too, had spent time with wild animals - and conquered. They too could conquer - only maybe not physically in this life.

And what a comfort for us. We do not have the advantages that Adam and Eve had. Compared to their Garden, Earth is a desert drear as one of our hymns puts it. And we are surrounded by wild animals - not just the woodchucks and coyotes and raccoons here in Minnesota, but all the attacks and dangers of this life. We do not always succeed in our conquest of Satan. We often fail, not only when his temptations last 40 days, but sometimes even 40 minutes or 40 seconds. But Jesus succeeded. Satan could not budge him for 40 days. Think about that: 40 days without sinning once!

And angels attended him, Mark says. They refreshed him once the 40 days were over. But why? Why did Jesus, the Son of God, need the angels’ help? Because he was not only the Son of God, he was the Son of Man as well. Not only had he conquered the devil, but he had conquered the devil as one of us.

Then Jesus continues his conquest of Satan with his ministry. The Bible says: After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. John’s imprisonment did not necessarily occur while Jesus was out in the desert. But it was the event that led Jesus to leave Judea, the southern part of the land, and head up to Galilee, to the less prestigious part of the country. Why? Was he afraid of the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem? Not one bit - he was not afraid of Satan himself. No, it was not fear. But Jesus simply needed to get started - to get started on building a ministry that would last beyond his lifetime. And Judea was not the place to start; there were too many obstacles. So Jesus went north to Galilee.

Jesus had conquered Satan by overcoming his temptations. Jesus would eventually conquer Satan completely by dying on the cross and then rising from the dead. That’s great! But there was a second part of this conquest of Satan: People had to know about it. And this came through proclaiming the good news of God, as Mark puts it here.

Proclaiming the good news of God. Listen to that phrase. Jesus’ main point in coming is not to instruct people on holy living, on what they can do to get closer to God, but rather simply proclaiming the good news of God. What is the good news of God? It is God’s victory over Satan, the original snake, who had led the human race astray. Jesus had just given that old snake a beating out in the desert and that was good news. And Jesus was not going to stop until he had totally beaten Satan and Satan can harm us no more.

The time has come, he said. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news! When does the kingdom of God come? It has already come, 2000 years ago, when Jesus made his conquest of Satan. But it comes to us
when we repent and believe the good news.

When we repent – that is, when we are brought to a realization of our sinfulness and acknowledge that we are in deep trouble and that we are unable to do anything about it to get ourselves out. Repent does not mean to clean up our lives; the word literally means, change your mind. We repent when we change our mind about sin: We realize that sin does not accomplish for us what we thought it would, but instead leads us to problems here on earth and an eternity in hell. We repent when we change our mind about ourselves and acknowledge that we are not the kind of people we should be, and that by ourselves we would be lost forever.

Then, once we repent, we are in a position to believe the good news - to believe the news that Jesus has taken our place and has conquered Satan and established his kingdom, with his perfect life as our Substitute and with his innocent death, again as our Substitute. To repent and believe the good news – that is everything!

If Jesus had not brought this good news of God, we would be lost. It was not enough for him to make his conquest of Satan out in the desert or even on the cross. We had to hear the good news.

This is the Gospel lesson for the first Sunday of Lent. In fact, the 40 days of Jesus’ temptation are said to be the basis for the church practice of having 40 days of Lent (Sundays do not count among the 40 days). And people decide to give things up for Lent and feel more spiritual. But that is not what it is about for us. Jesus is the one who made the sacrifice. For us, the purpose of Lent is to repent and hear the good news - to hear that, though we are sinners, there is one who was without sin and who conquered Satan on our behalf.

We celebrate Lent by hearing the good news - not only on Sunday mornings, but on Wednesday evenings as well. Jesus’ temptation is over. His work is complete. But ours is not. We still continue to be tempted every day. And yet, his kingdom has come. And he continues to send his angels to attend us in the desert of this life, and he continues to send his Word to refresh us, and he continues to confirm his victory for us with the Sacrament of his body and blood. With these provisions, we weak sinful human beings have all that we need to make our own personal conquest of Satan. Amen.

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