



# St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The First Sunday in Lent, February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008

✠ **In The Name of The Father and of The Son  
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.** ✠

We relate to the Lord Jesus Christ on different levels. We know him as Savior. We serve him as Lord and Head of the Church. We also follow and seek to imitate him as our example. It is in that capacity that I draw your attention to this remarkable incident which occurred at the beginning of his public ministry.

Jesus wandered amid warped and twisted limestone, and bare, jagged rocks. A series of temptations buffeted him. In the final assault of this conflict the devil took Jesus to a high mountain. He paraded before him the kingdoms of the world. *All of this will I give you*, the Devil said, *If you will bow down and worship me*. A part of the divine agenda was that the kingdoms of this world might become the kingdoms of our God and of his Christ. The thing is, the path to that conquest was the cross. That is what Jesus was being urged to avoid.

The temptation was plausible. Just look at history. The medieval age saw the attempt to convert the kingdom of God into a worldly dominion, and establish Messiah's kingdom through the use of carnal weapons. The twentieth century has seen the attempt to secularize the kingdom. How much more quickly could Jesus obtain the ends for which he came? This was spiritual detente. What's wrong with a little compromise if the ends are good? What the Devil is saying is, Bend a little. Don't be so rigid. You can bring heaven to earth and reign there. What's wrong with that? Mix a little diplomacy with your righteousness. Stoop to conquer. I will give you the prize without the cost! There was a cost here, of course, and it was enormous. *If you will bow down and worship me*. Satan doesn't give anything for nothing, though most of us who sell out to him do it for nothing.

We worship the devil when a good end is used to justify an immoral means. We bow our knee to him when wealth and power is more important than principle. When in the second century the church was being seduced by philosophy Tertullian wrote, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" Perhaps we need to ask, "What has Washington, D.C. to do with Jerusalem?" We might also ask, what is the measure of success in the kingdom of God? Is being successful more important than being faithful?

Bow down to me, says the Devil, and I'll give you a success ratio to take your breath away. We are being seduced with the same temptation today. If only we would move with the times people would join our churches. If only we compromised a little people would flock to worship with us. It's not true, of course.

The seduction is powerful, and the church has been seduced by it. It's been seduced by certain forms of feminism, power politics, and political correctness. What Satan was offering was immediate gratification. What an offer he made! All the kingdoms of the earth for the price of bending a knee to the spirit of the age. When the Church yields to this seduction man becomes the measure as well as the master of things.

There is an aspect to the saving work of our God that is missing from theology today. You can read books on theology and never find it mentioned. A kingdom exists which stands in complete opposition to the rule of God and embodies what Paul called *The mystery of iniquity*. What Jesus came to do was deliver us from its power, and provide us with the weapons to make war on it ourselves and live in victory.

That was what was at stake here. If Jesus had yielded to this seduction we would all be in the valley of shame and sin and ruin with no hope. Thank God he didn't yield. Thank God he took the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God, and used it to put the enemy to flight. In so doing he not only sealed his fate, he also became an example for us to follow, which brings us back to where we began.

Let's remember the circumstances. Jesus had been in spiritual warfare for nearly forty days. He was physically starved and emotionally drained. The prospect of a solution to the problem of evil was set before him that would circumvent the cross, along with any need for self-denial or struggle.

Some of you may be face to face with such an offer even as I speak. You are tired, weary of the struggle. You are fed up with losing battles. Nothing seems to work for you. You would give anything to be relieved of the battle. There's got to be an easier way than this. You thought the Christian life was about joy and happiness, and here you are struggling with temptation, assailed by doubts and fears. Is this really necessary?

Clergy confront this temptation all the time. Here's a way to grow the church without the cross, without self-sacrifice, without the need to give, without the hard and often discouraging work of fruitless preaching--no persecutions, no failures, no-one leaving the church, no disputation, no sweat and no tears, no need to cast your bread upon the waters and wait for years for the results. Quick and easy. Wealth, power, pleasure and fame—the cost is a little compliance with the spirit of the age. That is the cost here. It's the abandonment of truth—a total yielding of your mind to the spirit of the times. My friends, no matter what the offer the cost is just too high. It means short term advantage for long term loss.

What is really at stake is the integrity of God's word. After nearly thirteen years of ministry I am convinced that this is the water-shed issue of our times. You can take all the controversies that have divided the church over the last two hundred and fifty years and you will find most of them come down to this: What is the Bible, and what is the extent of its authority?

Jesus had no doubt about the answer to those two questions. His total allegiance was to the word of God. He had no question about what it was, or its place in his life. He knew God's word. He knew what it commanded and promised. He said on one occasion, *My food is to do the will of him who sent*

*me*. This is why his immediate response to this temptation was, *It is written*.

If we had been in Jesus' position we might have said, "It's time to end this." The godless world seems to be happier. They are always laughing and having fun, and here I am struggling and failing. How do I stand firm when those kinds of thoughts race through my mind? How do I gain the victory when every voice says to quit and take the path of least resistance?

We've already seen one aspect of this. Jesus used the word. He lifted up the shield of faith and poked the adversary with the sword of the Spirit. He did something else too. Indeed my friends, the first thing Jesus did, even before he used the word of God as a shield and sword was to make the decision to resist. St. James wrote, "Resist the Devil and he will flee from you." We can defeat this adversary through the power of Jesus working in our lives

The second thing is this. Jesus got angry. *Away from me, Satan*, he said. You can hear the outrage. How dare you suggest such a thing? How dare you attempt to distract me from the purpose of God in my life? How dare you attempt to deviate me from the principle goal of my life, which is the glory of God?

Matthew says that the devil left Jesus *until an opportune time*. The conflict had barely begun, though what had been established was a pattern of obedience that would take Jesus all the way to the cross. But he resisted the devil. He did so in our place and as our substitute. He also did it as our example.

Let me leave you with one final thought. It comes from the pen of William Barclay in his exposition of Matthew's Gospel. I'll let him close this sermon.

*What we call temptation is not meant to make us sin; it is meant to enable us to conquer sin. It is not meant to make us bad, it is meant to make us good. It is not meant to weaken us, it is meant to make us emerge stronger and finer and purer from the ordeal. Temptation is not the penalty of being a man, temptation is the glory of being man. It is the test which comes to a man whom God wishes to use.*

***To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.***