

Jesus Steps In and Wins For Us!

“At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!””

Next week spring training begins for baseball. I always get excited when spring training begins. It means that winter is on its way out and spring is coming. And I like baseball. Everyone has their baseball moments, some game that they will never forget. I remember the 1988 World Series between the L.A. Dodgers and the Oakland A’s. It was the first game and the A’s were ahead 4-3. It is the bottom of the ninth. The Dodgers are up to bat. There are two outs and one man on first and Lasorda brings in a pinch hitter, Kirk Gibson. This surprised most people. He didn’t start because both of his legs were injured. He literally limped up to bat. Facing him was Dennis Eckersley. Any list of the best relief pitchers of all time would have Eckersley as second or third. So it is one of the best relievers against a wounded batter. Gibson quickly fouled off two pitches. He then took a ball, and then he fouled a weak grounder down the first base line. Commentators were saying his injuries were preventing from swinging well. Somehow Gibson worked the count to 3-2. Then it happened. Gibson hit a walk off homerun, winning the game for the Dodgers who would go on to win the series 4-1. I still remember Gibson hobbling around the bases pumping his fist.

That is a dramatic baseball moment. I share it with you because that is what we have in our gospel reading from earlier. God calls in a pinch hitter, so to speak. But he can’t send you or me in; we would fail. He goes for his best option, his own Son, Jesus Christ. And what does he do? He steps in and wins the game for us.

I. Jesus fights the devil for us.

The first Sunday in Lent has traditionally been dedicated to Jesus fighting the devil. So it isn’t surprising that we find Jesus battling the devil in the wilderness as one of our readings. Three of the gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us about this battle. But Mark’s is a little different. He doesn’t say as much as Matthew and Luke, but he does give us a couple details they don’t. What is he emphasizing for us? Well, he is telling us Jesus was in the worse possible shape to fight the devil, and yet he still won.

You would think that an athlete before an important game or match would rest and get himself mentally, physically and emotionally the best he can be. Not Jesus. He put himself in the worse possible shape against the devil. Just listen. ***“At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.”*** At once, right after his Baptism where God announced that Jesus is the one to save the world, the Holy Spirit lead Jesus out in the desert. That is a weak translation. The word for “lead” here means to throw someone into some situation. The King James translates it, “drove.” It is a word used to describe how Jesus drove the moneylenders out of the temple or how he drove demons out of people. Now, don’t think that Jesus was reluctant and the Spirit had to shove him. No. It is more like a ring for boxing and wrestling. The Lord throws Jesus into the ring and says, “Here he is. Now fight him.”

He was there forty days, and Matthew and Luke tell us he fasted. In other words, he was starving. He was very weak physically and mentally. And it is the desert. No motel with air conditioning to rest at night. Then Mark adds one detail the others don’t. There were wild animals in the desert. Remember how Samson fought lions in the same region, and David had to wrestle with bears and lions? It is different today, but then jackals, lions, bears, scorpions, snakes were a constant threat. Jesus had to contend with them, too. I picture him finding some cave at night for protection. But there was one particular lion he faced, Satan, who is a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. He knew who Jesus was and why he came. He tried to kill him as a baby through Herod. He heard God announce at his Baptism, “This is my Son with whom I am well pleased.” He remembers the promise God made in Eden how this seed of the woman has come to crush his head. The devil must stop him, and the best way is to somehow lead the Son of God into temptation so he is incapable of being our Savior.

So Satan tempted him. Mark and Luke say three times. I think it was relentless over the forty days. Could you go forty days without giving in to temptation, forty hours, forty minutes, forty seconds? But Jesus did.

What do we learn from this? First, Satan is real. He isn’t a prop we use to scare people into heaven. He can’t defeat God, so he tries to cause as much damage as possible by going after us. He is called a murderer because he tempted God’s perfect people to sin and ruin his perfect creation. Second, we learn that God made sure Jesus was in the worse possible shape possible. Kirk Gibson limped into the batter’s box against the best reliever at the time. It looked lopsided. Jesus was as weak as one can be. So he didn’t defeat the devil with cunning or a physical strength. And notice that he didn’t use his power and throw lightning bolts at Satan either.

So how did he win? He had something that doesn’t depend on our mental or emotional abilities. He used God’s Word, in particular his promises, and faith in that Word. Read through Matthew’s and Luke’s account. The devil told Jesus God has abandoned him and he must take matters into his own hands. But Jesus countered with promises God makes in his Word. And as a true human, Jesus had saving faith, too, just like you and me, and that faith didn’t depend on whether he had a good night’s rest or a

full stomach. It is powerful because it trusts God. These are the same tools God has given you. You have the same promises. He sparks the same faith.

And angels came and attended him. Did the angels feed Jesus? Many commentators think so. Did they comfort him, aid him, help him and out of the desert? I think so.

Do you see what God is doing here? He sent Jesus to us as our substitute, a pinch hitter, if you will. Jesus came and took our place against the devil and wins. Now, if God sent you and me into the desert to battle the devil, I know I would lose. We have something Jesus didn't have. We have a sinful nature which actually wants to obey the devil. Jesus had no sin though tempted in every way like you and me. That is why God sent Jesus into this world. He came to take our place and live the holy life we can't live. But he does more. At the cross he takes our place, too. He died for our sins so it is Jesus, not us, who suffers hell and is punished there. So, Jesus steps in for us and wins forgiveness and heaven for us.

II. Jesus defeats the devil for us.

It doesn't matter what sport it is, football, basketball, baseball, whatever. You have to have both a good defense and a good offense. You can be the best offensive team there is, but if your defense is rotten, the other team can still win by scoring more. You could be a stubborn defensive team who gives up few points, but if you can't score, you will still lose. You need both. We just saw Jesus on the defensive, parrying and defeating the devil's temptations. Now it is time to go on offense.

"After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!'" Do you know what is happening? An invasion. God is invading this world. I like it how C.S. Lewis puts it in his book *Mere Christianity*. "Enemy-occupied territory—that is what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us to take part in a great campaign of sabotage." Think of Normandy and D-Day when the allies, including French troops, invaded the beaches of France to drive out the occupying German army.

God is spreading his kingdom. How? He has no armies. He doesn't take over nations. He doesn't overthrow governments. You know how. You memorized it in Luther's explanation to the Second Petition: "God's kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives his Holy Spirit, so that by his grace we believe his holy Word and lead a godly life now on earth and forever in heaven." It is his Word, and the Holy Spirit in that Word, that spreads his kingdom. Again, he doesn't want to overthrow this or that government. He is no threat to rulers or the economy. He wants to overthrow the devil. He comes to rule in our hearts and in our lives. Jesus tells us how.

"Repent and believe the good news," Jesus preached. Repent. That is a very descriptive word. It means to change your mind or to turn around. If you are going in the wrong direction, what must happen first? You must realize you are heading in the wrong direction. Then turn around, then go in the right direction. Repent starts with us realizing we are sinners heading away from God to destruction. Next, turn around. We repent when sinners like us believe that in Jesus God forgives us and gives us a place in his kingdom on earth and in heaven. Finally, you start heading in the right direction. Repentance leads us to hate sin and fight temptation and do what is pleasing to God.

Yet, the devil still resists and he uses the world to resist. Are we resisting, too? Are we afraid to get involved? We like to call ourselves Christian, but are we afraid to worship, pray, evangelize, witness, and live as Christians, and thus pose no real threat to the devil at all? That is why Luther's explanation to the Second Article starts with us first: "God's kingdom certainly comes by itself even without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may also come to us." Ask Jesus to keep coming to you. Repent isn't just for those who become Christian for the first time. Still living in a sinful world where the devil prowls around looking for someone to devour, straddled to the sinful nature, we could use a life of daily repentance, too.

So, come Lord Jesus. Let your kingdom come first to me, and then to the world with me. Amen.