

**Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-13; Matthew 4:1-11**

**First Sunday of Lent; March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014**

**This sermon was preached by Pastor Jim Page at Trinity Lutheran Church**

**“Identity Theft”**

Dearest brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace be with you all. There was an overweight business associate who decided it was time to shed some excess pounds. He took his new diet seriously, even changing his driving route to avoid his favorite bakery. One morning, however, he arrived at work carrying a gigantic coffee cake.

“This is a very special cake,” he explained. “I accidentally drove by the bakery this morning and there in the window were a host of warm goodies. I felt this was no accident and I prayed, ‘Lord, if you want me to have one of those delicious coffee cakes, let me have a parking place directly in front of the bakery.’”

“And sure enough,” he continued, “the eighth time around the block, there it was!”

Temptation is a topic we can joke about but it’s actually an important topic because temptation shapes our identity as individuals in an adverse way. Today, we’ll see how Jesus’ identity, grounded in his trust in God, equipped him to overcome temptation and as Christians, we are to do the same.

We’re going to begin with the basic truth that our identity is rooted in relationships. Who you are is largely shaped by who you are in relations to others. For example, I couldn’t be a father without children, a husband without a wife, a pastor without a congregation.

Our gospel reading today begins in Matthew chapter 4 but chapter 3:16-17 gives us a context since it is there that Jesus’ identity is made known. Matthew writes about Jesus’ baptism where the Spirit of God descended like a dove on him and light surrounded him. God states Christ’s identity, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

We read from today’s reading in chapter 4, verse one: “**Then** Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.” Then means right after, it means that these two stories are linked together, there is nothing in between. In one moment, God is clapping like a proud parent and the next minute Jesus is being led out to the desert, alone, to be tempted by the devil.

Matthew writes, “After fasting for forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.” That’s obvious. Then the drama begins “The tempter came to him and said, ‘If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.’”

It a simple statement. Are you the Son of God? Yes. Are you hungry? Yes. Then turn these stones into bread. What we see here is the central message of temptation: You are not enough. Jesus, you are not enough, your famished and hungry, you could have more. That same message pervades our culture by

attacking our identity as a child of God by creating a sense of lack, inadequacy, and insecurity. You are not skinny enough, pretty enough, strong enough, rich enough, happy enough. Temptation is identity theft in who you are to shape you to be something else; it is identity theft of a God who provides all that you need. With this message of you are not enough, Jesus faces this issue, “Can I trust my God, my Heavenly Father?”

Jesus responds confidently: “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” (Matthew 4:4)

What Jesus is doing is he’s reaching back to a story about God’s people in the Old Testament book of Dueteronomy. They were in bondage for 400 years in Egypt. Moses led them out through the Red Sea and through a desert to the promised land. God miraculously feeds them during that 40 year journey. They’d get up every day and there would be cakes of bread on the ground. They were fed physically but learned that God knows, cares and can be trusted to provide for our needs.

Just before entering the promised land, Moses gathers everyone together and says the following: “Remember how the Lord you God led you all the way in the desert these forty years. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna...to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” (Duet. 8:2-3)

Moses was saying that simply having your need met is not enough. The more important piece is God’s word and faithfulness in your life. Every time they ate, they likely said, “God is faithful.” Their identity was God’s people; God’s identity was faithfulness in providing, and caring, for them.

He then writes: “Be careful that you do not forget the Lord, your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decess that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will be proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and out the land of slavery.” (Duet. 8:11-14)

Moses is saying, “I’m concerned that when you have more than you need, you’ll forget where it came from. When you have more than you need, you’ll forget to live under the guidance of God’s commands and word. Most importantly, and this is key, I’m concerned that when you have more than you need, and you feel like you lack something, you’ll think it’s all up to you.”

God was saying to the nation of Israel what is spoken throughout the rest of the Bible and what is spoken to us today: “Don’t forget that I’m aware and that I care.” In a world where your identity is shaped by the message of temptation: you are not enough...how easy it is for us to forget what God has provided in our lives.

Every time you are tempted to bend, break or ignore the rules in order to have what you want, you're saying 'God, I don't trust you. I don't think you'll provide for me. I don't think anything will change; he won't change, she won't change, they won't change. God, if I don't do something, nothing's going to happen. I don't think you care. I deserve this. I'll do what I think is best for me.'

Our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ comes with expectations and standards to guide how we live given by God for our benefit. When Moses talked about forgetting God when we are blessed, thinking that it's all about our needs, we will easily regard those God-given expectations and standards as not important. When you quit trusting God, you'll quit obeying God and when you quit obeying God, you'll quit believing in God...it's just a matter of time.

Jesus hasn't eaten for 40 days and the devil says, "Meet your needs. You're hungry. Just do this!" Jesus could have said, "That's true. If God loved me, he'd give me something to eat. If God loved me, I wouldn't be having this conversation. If God loved me, I wouldn't be here in the desert sitting next to you. If God loved me, you wouldn't be here next to me." How many people have shattered their lives by succumbing to temptation by saying "Why would God? Why did God? If God cared..." while looking to something better?

Jesus said, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:4) Yes, I'm hungry. Hey devil: I don't know where God is but God has spoken to this already. He's said in history that he will provide for the needs of his people. God proved a long time ago that when men and women trust him, he meets needs. As hungry as I am, I trust God and I have enough.

A couple years later, Jesus heard another voice saying: "He saved others but he cannot save himself. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, 'I am the Son of God'" (Matthew 27:43) Words heard while he was nailed to a cross.

In overwhelming temptation to save his life, Jesus held to his identity as a child of God. Jesus held to God's identity and trusted God with his life. Can we do the same? Can we trust that God will provide when temptations about that say: you are not enough? Jesus trusted God and three days later, the world changed since his tomb was empty as he seized, and we will seize, the joy of God's promises.

It's not easy, following Jesus is challenging. Don't forget God and what he asks of us...love your enemies and forgive others, remember all that you've been given and finally, remember that you are forgiven and that you are loved by a God who has named you with an awesome identity: child of God. Amen.