

## First Sunday of Lent-Year C

Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16

Luke 4:1-13

“Deal or No Deal”

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

Dearest brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The television show ‘Deal or No Deal’ has captivated millions of television viewers around the world. Contestants play to win \$1 million in a game of nerves, instinct, and raw intuition.

The game unfolds as the contestant is confronted with 26 briefcases full of varying amounts of cash ranging from a measly 1 penny to \$1 million. Without knowing the amount in each brief case, the contestant picks one-his to keep, if he chooses, until it’s opened at the end of the game.

The risk element is heightened as the contestant instinctively eliminates the remaining 25 cases with each being opened and the cash value revealed. The goal is to eliminate briefcases that have small dollar amounts. The pressure mounts after each round as the pre-determined number of briefcases are opened.

At the end of a round, the contestant is then tempted by a mysterious entity known as ‘the banker’. Tempted to accept an offer of cash, to make a deal, and thereby end the game. The greater the number of suitcases with large dollar amounts still in play...the greater the cash offer. If cases with big cash values are opened, the bankers offer decreases. The banker does not want you to win more money.

As the banker’s offer is made, the host, Howie Mandel, asks the all-important question ‘Deal or No Deal’?

It’s a game where more is better, there is an element of control mixed with chance, and the factor of the unknown is both exciting and unnerving.

‘Deal or No Deal’. A simple question seeking a simple yet definite answer.

It is simple questions that beg both simple yet definite answers.

“Sir, would you like the additional warranty on this product?”

“Would you like the dessert menu?”

“Will you marry me?”

In the church, there are two circumstances where the answer ‘I do’ is given to simple questions. The first is at a wedding as a lifelong marriage vow is made. The other, is at a baptism. It is at a baptism that parents and sponsors first say ‘I do’ to nurturing the faith of their child by teaching them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creeds and the Ten Commandments as well

as by their example of Christian living.

As a gathered community of faith we say 'I do' as witnesses of a baptism. 'I do' to holding the newly baptized in prayer and in supporting them in their faith development.

Yet, there is one key, very unique question addressed to everyone where parents/godparents and the congregation together respond 'I do'. That question is:

"Do you renounce the devil and all his empty promises?"

We easily say together, and keeping with the flow of the service, "I do."

It's an odd question within our time of life.

Years ago, various sicknesses and natural disasters were unexplainable and were believed to be a result of the devil's handiwork. Today, with extraordinary advances in medicine, science, and technology, we are obviously far more aware of the world around us.

It's seem as though time has led to the devil, rather evil, being relegated to more manageable and explainable psychoses that can be named and cataloged within the human mind and heart. Figures such as Adolph Hitler, Pol Pot, and Osama Bin Laden enter into the mass media and general dialog as evil.

By doing so, we move on with our lives. Evil's presence is identifiable and regarded as grand events that are never forgotten. It's not a topic often thought about for us in our normative, day to day life.

Go up to someone and say, "I'm battling the devil today", they're either going to think your having a bad day at work or will simply give you a bewildered facial expression with a likely response, 'Are you serious?'

"Do you renounce the devil and all his empty promises?"

Life is marked with episodes of darkness. Darkness where life deals us a challenging hand of cards to play. This darkness resides within various life situations that we experience personally and witness in the lives of others. With further reflection and discernment, perhaps this seemingly outdated baptismal promise is not so outdated.

This is not a depressing referral between good and bad, between an angel on one shoulder and a little red fellow with a pitchfork on the other. It is rather a keen recognition of the subtle reality of life.

It is in those times of darkness where God's presence seems faint, his goodness absent, and our faith weak...that evil is sensed.

In her book, Graduate-Everything You Need to Succeed after College, author Kristen Gustafson wrote a lengthy chapter titled 'Surviving the First Day of Work.' For many, the first day of work proves greatly challenging simply because of the element of the unknown. Questions such as 'what will my boss be like' cause great anxiety along with dealing with new people and workplace politics. The first day at work, at school, or any new beginning can be challenging. Thus the phrase, 'baptism by fire'.

In our gospel reading this morning, Jesus is experiencing his first day on the job...his first days of ministry.

He has been baptized and is led out into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights and is visited by the devil. No where in all of scripture is the devil described aside from being a tempter such as in the Garden of Eden and here in Jesus' first days of ministry.

Jesus is alone in the wilderness which in Israel is actually desert conditions. He's alone, he doesn't eat for forty days and he is tempted three times by the devil. A monastery has been built on the site believed to be where Jesus was tempted.

Just like in the game 'Deal or No Deal' the temptations are marked with more being better, control is mixed with chance, and the unknown is both exciting and unnerving. This all at a time where Jesus enters his new role of ministry as God's son, in human form, on earth.

That is key, here is where Jesus first experiences temptations within a human frame.

The offers are appealing and do not appear to be anything horribly wrong: bread, wealth and power. It's doesn't seem as anything bad is going on, there's no murder or abuse of others.

It's easy to think of evil as bad but it is often the case where what is evil, and what can lead us to unhealthy living, is masked in what seems appealing. Appealing beyond what we have...beyond what we've been given. Fred Craddock, noted Bible scholar, author and professor emphasizes such a claim,

"The clarity of evil is elusive when we purchase what we think we need."

We purchase such items, titles or relationships with not only our dollars, but with our time, our devotion, and our commitment. Doing so under the umbrella of 'need'.

Bob Russell, in his book, *Money: A User's Manual*, describes a farmer who once grew discontent with his farm. He griped about the lake on his property always needed to be stocked and managed. The hills humped his roads causing him to go up and down. The fat cows lumbered through his pasture. Maintaining the fence and feeding the cows were just a headache!

He decided he wanted to sell the place and move somewhere else. He called a real-estate agent and made plans to list the farm. A few days later, the agent called seeking his approval for the advertisement she intended to place in the local paper. She read the ad to the farmer.

It described a lovely farm in an ideal location-quiet and peaceful, contoured with rolling hills, carpeted with soft meadows, nourished by a fresh lake, and blessed with well-bred livestock. The farmer said, "Read that ad to me again."

After hearing it again, he paused and said, "I've given it some thought and I've changed my mind. I'm not going to sell. I've been looking for a place like that my whole life."

The apostle Paul wrote a unique insight in his letter to the Philippians, "I have learned that in whatever state I am, to be content." (Philippians 4:11)

When we refer back to baptism, one of the parental promises is, "You should place in

their hands the holy scriptures and provide for their instruction in the Christian faith.”

The great power that Christ exhibits within his first days on the job, and power given to us, is a bold, powerful, unwavering confidence in God’s word.

As Jesus sits in the wilderness, tempted to enhance the basic of human needs, his reply begins... “It is written” and the final reply “It says...”. A constant dependence on God’s word. In being alone for forty days...there was significant time to be in God’s presence.

It is God’s word with deliberate time in God’s presence marked with prayer where God’s glory is evident.

For us as faithful Christians...taking God’s word...delving in the Bible...a paragraph at a time...we learn of God’s blessings again.

Making deliberate time to be in God’s presence and peace amid the pace of life.

And prayer keeps us connected to God.

All lead to a confidence grounded in God’s providence in addressing our needs, God’s strength to help us in our weakness, and God’s promise that love and goodness overcomes all evil.

Jesus’ mission, as God’s word made flesh, said ‘Deal’ in taking on our humanity.

‘Deal’ to forty days in the wilderness, eating nothing, and overcoming temptation.

‘Deal’ when he responded to the 10 lepers request for healing.

‘Deal’ when he sat down to eat with the outcasts, despised, and poor.

‘Deal’ in being arrested, put on trial, tortured, nailed to a cross, and dying for our sins.

‘Deal’ in giving us his blessings beyond death.

In saying ‘Deal’, saying ‘I do’ to you in love at the baptism font, you are a recipient of God’s gifts of forgiveness, love and promise of life eternal.

We are blessed by God with many blessings...life, home, family, health, food...all are reasons for us to be content with what we have.

To be content when more is better, there is an element of control mixed with chance each day, while the element of the unknown is both exciting and unnerving.

Jesus said ‘deal’ to you and empowered by God’s gifts...may we continue to be faithful and say ‘deal’ to God each day as we live out our faith, content with everything.

‘Do you renounce the devil and all his empty promises.’

And the gathered faithful responds in a holy chorus, ‘I do’.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

