

**Threats to the Soul**

## COMMUNION

March 1, 2020

**Psalm 32**

*<sup>1</sup> Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. <sup>2</sup> Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. <sup>3</sup> While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. <sup>4</sup> For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. <sup>5</sup> Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the guilt of my sin. <sup>6</sup> Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. <sup>7</sup> You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. <sup>8</sup> I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. <sup>9</sup> Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you. <sup>10</sup> Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD. <sup>11</sup> Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.*

**Matthew 4: 1-11**

*<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. <sup>3</sup> The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." <sup>4</sup> But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from*

*the mouth of God.'"<sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple,<sup>6</sup> saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"<sup>7</sup> Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"<sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor;<sup>9</sup> and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."<sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"<sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*



Let us pray...

On Ash Wednesday we entered into the season of Lent as we talked about preparing our souls. The holy season of Lent is about preparing for the coming resurrection of Jesus Christ. On Ash Wednesday we talked about two focuses that we look to during this time of the Christian year. The first focus was the acts of confession and repentance. These require us to look within and to search our hearts or souls to find all that hinders our relationship with Jesus. The habits of confession and repentance are ones that we as followers of Jesus should practice on an almost ongoing basis. Our sin is ever before us, so to speak. This cycle of sinning, confession, and repentance is present in our Psalm for today.

Please turn with me to Psalm 32 as we look at David's experience with sin and forgiveness. The Psalm begins with David rejoicing in times when the soul is right with God, when "*there is no deceit*" in his heart. As we continue to work through the Psalm, David remembers times when he "*kept silence*". In those times he describes his sin as "*heavy upon me*" as he felt as if his body was wasting away. You and I can remember times when we have lived with our sin, times when we kept living in our sin because we were enjoying it or finding pleasure in it. In these seasons we were under attack, our souls were being threatened. Yet, at a point, through the working of the Holy Spirit, we began to feel conviction and we were led to confess and repent. That is what David is talking about in verse five. He confessed and the Lord "*forgave the guilt of my sin*". God restored David back into a right relationship. We can also remember these times in our lives, times when we came before God, confessed, and were washed clean. In just a few minutes we will share in Holy Communion. In the sacrament we will walk through these steps of coming before God, of confessing, of being forgiven, and of being made new again.

Psalm 32 shifts gears in verse six. Here David begins to lean into a more consistent and personal relationship with God. He encourages the faithful to pray to God in times of distress and trial. David reminds us that when we rest in God, the waters will not overcome us, and the trouble will not overtake us. Then, in verse eight, God speaks and promises to instruct and teach us. I love what follows in verse nine.

Here we read, *"Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you"*. Is that not us in our battle with sin at times?



We know the right choice to make. We know that turning to God is our best bet. Yet we find ourselves in this position from time to time. Sometimes, in those moments when the pressure or suffering ramps us, we are tempted to give in to other things that remove the stress or the fear or the worry. In our passage from Matthew 4, that is part of what Jesus faced in the wilderness when Satan came to tempt him. David closes Psalm 32 with these words of hope and promise: *"Steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord"*. Do you want to be like this donkey, or do you want to shout for joy as you are surrounded by God's steadfast love?

As a means for Jesus to prepare his soul, he is led out into the wilderness to face three threats to the soul.



The story is found in Matthew 4. As we read in verse two, Jesus began his time of preparation with fasting. For forty days and forty nights Jesus fasted and prayed out there in the wilderness. The forty days mirrors Israel's forty years in the wilderness of the desert, chronicled in Exodus. In the gospel of Matthew Jesus is reenacting Israel's time of testing and preparation. But unlike their failures when faced with times of trial and suffering, Jesus models the faithful response to temptations. As Jesus wrestles with each threat to his soul, he faced a question that the Israelites faced and

that we all face: what does God really want for us? When we come face to face with temptation, our choice usually boils down to doing God's will or to doing our will.

The three temptations that Jesus faces in verses three through nine are for provision, power, and prestige. In their wilderness experience, the Israelites grumbled for food, questioning whether God loved them enough to not let them starve to death in the desert. All they could focus on was provision. They did not turn to God in trust or in faith. That was David's counsel in Psalm 32, right? In his wilderness experience, Jesus has not eaten for forty days. Satan comes and tempts Jesus, inviting him to turn the stones into bread. Jesus knows the sustenance found in the spiritual relationship with God is far superior to bread or to God being something akin to a genie that can produce physical food for us. Jesus responds with a verse from Deuteronomy 8: *"One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God"*. Turning the scene personal, if you had not eaten for forty days and you could turn stones into food, would you?

Maybe your hunger is not physical. What is it that you are hungry for? What is that thing or that outcome that you are hungering for? Or, let me ask it another way: what do you feel like you have been denied that you deserve? Dig deep for a second. Connect to your humanity. What are you hungry for?... Forty days without food. Jesus was hungry. When you find yourself there, how can that lead to temptation and on to sin? How can you deny self and keep the faith? If Deuteronomy 8 is not your go-to scripture when tempted with provisions or with

the things of this world, what is your go-to verse? Perhaps that is homework for the week ahead.

The second temptation is centered around power. For me this would be the need to be in control. Satan challenges Jesus to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple, seeing if God will send angels to rescue him. Satan is wily, here quoting from Psalm 91. But Jesus is wiler. He quotes again from Deuteronomy, this time from chapter 6, saying, "*Do not put the Lord your God to the test*". At times we can all be tempted to test God. When we have been in the valley for what feels like too long a time, we can question God's love for us. We can test God with our "How long?" and our "Why?" questions. But that is not the only way that we can test God. When we encounter a problematic season in life or when we have gotten ourselves into a corner, we can test God with our if-then prayers: "If you'll.... God, then I'll ...". We can also walk right along the line of faithfulness or sinning and ask God if he'll still love us when... Again, I invite you to dig deep, to take a moment to consider this: How do you test God?

The last temptation centers around prestige. Status or popularity or titles are other words for this temptation. Offering him control over all the nations of the world, Satan tempts Jesus. But there is an if-only condition attached. Satan will yield control of the world to Jesus - if Jesus will just fall down and worship Satan. Again, Jesus turns to the source for strength, returning to the Bible and to Deuteronomy 6, denying Satan's temptation by saying, "*Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him*". Culture leads us to believe that we should always be scrambling upward, always seeking more or newer or better. Of course, that is

not ever attainable. There is always a better title, a higher promotion, a newer car, and so on. So, we can feel like this guy, heading upwards but hanging on for dear life as things come careening down at him. The alternative is the same as it was with the temptations for provision and power. It is what David spoke of in the Psalm. Trust in God. Turn to him, trust in him.



Other names for provision, power, and prestige are idols and false gods. And there are other temptations. Provision, power, and prestige do not have the corner on the market, do they? The means that we can turn to as we strive to attain these worldly titles and things are as varied as the ends. There are a lot of evil or sinful ways one can go about getting that next promotion or the money to afford that great vacation. There are many paths to getting our way or to be in control of a situation or of others. We can be really good at finding ways for the ends to justify the means. We can rationalize or justify about anything too. What idols or false gods are you struggling with as you seek to control the threats to your souls this week? One more time, dig deep. Search honestly. Be vulnerable and open to God. What it is it that you are tempted to bow down to, to worship? How can you surrender that to God, so that you can stop living life like the man in this cartoon?

The Lenten sermon series that we have just begun is called "Seasons of the Soul". The first step was the call to confession and repentance that we heard on Ash Wednesday. The next step, which we are focusing on today, is preparing the



soul, beginning to make the necessary changes needed in preparation for Easter. In doing so we must learn to deal with the threats to the soul. Temptation is all around us. Like was the case with Jesus, our only hope is to trust in God.



As we draw to a close this morning, let us consider the temptations that Jesus faced: provision, power, and prestige. My friends, again, these are our temptations too. As we consider the temptations and Jesus' solution, let us also consider how we acquire our daily bread, how we understand what it means to live in love with God and one another, and how we impact and affect the world around us. I invite you to consider how to live freed from the tempter, free from the bondage of sin – because, as the psalmist reminds us – we are forgiven and we are loved. As you spend time this week reading our Lenten booklet, I hope you are able to add depth and understanding to our battle to prepare the soul for a better and more personal relationship with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. This week's section is entitled "The Old Adam and the New". Blessings on your first week of Advent. Amen and amen.

### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) Grow. For growth, the soil must be prepared. What threats do you need to tend to for your soul to experience true growth this Lenten season?
- 2) Pray. What earthly "thing" do you hunger for? Pray to God for deliverance and strength.
- 3) Study. Jesus relied on the Word of God when tempted. Spend some time this week finding passages that address your biggest temptations.