



ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

Sunday February 14, 2014 - Lent 1

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

The passage selected for the sermon today is taken from the Gospel:

“Then the devil leaveth Him, and behold, angels came and ministered unto Him.”

I fear it is a particular character of our culture that we are uniquely short sighted. We are easily absorbed by our daily battles, and we lose sight of our true goals. We are relentless in our pursuit of immediate gratification, and while it shows in all aspects of our life, it is particularly reflected in our relationship with our smart phones. We put our lives in danger every day, ignoring the perils of our daily commute by answering calls and returning texts instead of keeping our attention on the task at hand, safely navigating to our destination.

Not only do we put our physical lives in jeopardy, we routinely put our emotional interests in peril as well. How many serious conversations with spouses, or between parents and children, or lifelong friends, are interrupted because we can't help but react to the little monster vibrating in our pockets. This kind of short sightedness, of devotion to instant gratification, is devastating when dealing with temptation and the devil. Without an eye toward our ultimate purpose, we easily succumb to the temptation of the moment. We become easy pickings for the devil.

The purpose of Lent is to lengthen our gaze, to lift our eyes back to our created purpose, so that we can weigh the temptations

of the day against our progress to our destination, which is to share eternal life with our Lord and with the ones we love. The forty days of preparation by Jesus in the desert had a twofold effect. We tend to concentrate on the first effect, that the discipline of prayer and fasting helped Jesus to withstand temptation, both immediate and ultimate, in Gethsemane. What we overlook, is that by resisting the distractions of moment, Jesus opened the channel of grace that would support him to His ultimate purpose, which is His sacrifice for our Redemption.

His resistance to the siren call of the fallen angel was rewarded by the ministrations of faithful angels. The angels came to Jesus because in His human nature, He was obedient. Similarly, when we can resist temptation and persist to our created purpose, the channel of grace personified by these ministering angels is opened to us as well. Our Lenten discipline is not only about resisting the temptation to immediate gratification, it is about opening the channel to persistent grace in our lives.

When Satan first tempted Adam and Eve, he developed a pattern of escalation that weakened resistance until finally undermining their will. First, he pointed out that the fruit was comely and desirable, establishing an attraction. Then, he diminished their grasp of the consequence, appealing to their ability to rationalize. To Eve he says, ‘certainly you

would not surely die from eating this fruit. God couldn't be that arbitrary to his favorite creatures, unless....' (And then Satan closes the deal, appealing to our fatal weakness, our pride) 'God was afraid that you would be His equal. You deserve to taste the fruit. You won't only not die, you will be like God himself. You deserve to be like God.'

The pattern was set. Attract, rationalize, resent our boundaries, presume to make our own rules instead of following God's rules. And the pattern was successful, never failing until the devil encountered Jesus in the desert. He read from his well polished script to Jesus. 'Why are you out here fasting. Why would you deny yourself the pleasures you deserve. You're hungry, you could make bread of these rocks. What is this self denial going to get you anyways. It's not like God will punish you. You are the Messiah, the Chosen one. If you threw yourself from the pinnacle of the temple, angels would spring to your defense. You couldn't so much as bruise your toe against a stone. You could do whatever you wanted to do, and you would still be protected, even cherished by God.' And then, Satan delivers the punch line, the clincher, the appeal to the pride of humanity. 'If God loves you, why is he restricting you to be the King of this miserable tribe. Even Moses begged to be relieved of leading them. Why are you being held back. God must be afraid to give you more power, jealous you will be more loved, more adored. You deserve better than this. In fact, you should be resentful that God is holding you back. Hell, I could give you all the kingdoms of the world instead of this piddling town full of ingrates. Serve me and I will give you what you deserve, ALL the kingdoms of the world!'

And for the first time the formula failed. Jesus would not forsake his duty to His Father for gratification of the moment. He would be obedient where Satan would provoke resentment, humble when Satan would appeal to pride. Though He was hungry from his

prayers and fasting, he did not need to make rocks bread to feed himself. Instead, He would look toward making His Body the very Bread that would feed the world, that would give his followers strength to resist temptations as He did. Though Jesus, in His obedience, was not deserving of any suffering, He would not tempt God to exempt him from pain, but would suffer, even unto death on the Cross, so that His creation would be reconciled. He accepted death, and in doing so, He turned His Crucifixion into the door to everlasting life. He was humble for us, even though tempted as we are, because He knew that no greater portion of the kingdom of death in this world would be worth exchanging for the place He had at His Father's hand in the Kingdom of life. And because he was obedient and humble, His Father sent His angels to minister to his beloved Son, in whom He was well pleased.

Because Jesus was obedient, and because He has adopted us through Baptism into His life, and His inheritance, we too have grace by the Holy Spirit to resist temptation. Not only does that grace fortify us in our resolve against temptation, it transforms us by the knowledge that greater joys than we can imagine are reserved for us. Even better, by our participation in the Eucharist, with the Bread of Life, we perceive the mystical experience and knowledge of life and love from the world for which we are bound, overflowing into our own lives, giving us the courage and faith to persevere while here, knowing that we are already and eternally embraced by the love of God.

Let this Lent be the time that we lengthen our gaze from the temptations and distractions of this world, open our hearts to grace by prayer and fasting, retune our lives to the purpose for which they were created, to follow the example that Jesus gives us in the desert so that we will follow Him through the cross to Eternal Life.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen