

Sermon Outline

1. To be connected to Satan is the absence of God, complete nothingness, detached from reality as we know it.
2. Which is why Satan is connected with a serpent, with falling, with wilderness, with darkness—the darkness we are in because of sin.
3. But Jesus did what we could not: he went into the darkness of the wilderness to defeat Satan for us.
4. Thus Jesus lightens our darkness by triumphing over Satan in the wilderness and on the cross.

WHEN YOU ENTER A GREAT DARKNESS, KNOW THAT CHRIST WENT INTO THE WILDERNESS FOR YOU.

5. Therefore, though surrounded by darkness, you fear nothing.

Sermon

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

My dear beloved flock, the text for our meditation today is the Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew, the fourth chapter, verses one through eleven.

Boys and girls, I pray that you are doing well this morning. What comes to mind when you hear the word Satan? You might think of a giant evil monster, or a guy in a red suit with a pitchfork in hand ruling over fire and evil things. In the ancient world, Satan was not always pictured as an evil monster or hell a place of fire and burning. No, Satan and hell were often portrayed as more benign images. In our text for today, we see that Satan is very real. He is not just something that we have made up like a scary boogie man to scare kids. He comes and tempts our Lord. He does so in ways that seem nice and kind but in actuality are anything but. How does Jesus defeat Satan on our behalf? Ponder that question as you hear the rest of the sermon. You may go back to your seats and those who love you

1.

But don't be deceived, to be connected in any way to evil, Satan, and hell is to be connected to the absence of God, as complete nothingness, as complete boredom, like two parallel lines going into the eternal unknown. To be connected to evil, to Satan, was to be detached from reality as we know it—with no points of reference to real life, to our common everyday experience.

2.

This may be why in the garden Satan presents himself as a serpent. Touch a snake, and there is no other feeling like it in the world—it is unreal—a creepy

feeling shuddering through your body. Snakes create fear—they are not part of your normal, everyday life.

This is why a gross outburst of transgression is called “falling into sin” and denying Christ is called “falling from grace.” When you fall, your body goes into immediate shock and panic, because gravity as you know it has been suspended. You are detached from the only reality you know and trust.

This is why the desert is Satan’s place to tempt Jesus. It’s a place of nothingness, just endless sand and rocks—no life, no vegetation, just plain nothing. Endless nothingness. The desert is the opposite of that first Paradise, which was filled with the complexity of life, overflowing with all kinds of delights.

This is why darkness and Satan are always linked. Most people have never experienced total darkness, where there are no points of reference. Place yourself in a dark cave with absolutely no light, and you will know a kind of fear that can only be described as demonic. Complete nothingness encompasses you, and disorientation sets in almost immediately.

God created the world out of nothing. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the first thing God said on the first day of creation was, “Let there be light” (Gen 1:3), and suddenly the darkness, the nothingness, was dispelled. From now on, all the goodness God would create could be seen. Light was now separate from the darkness, and on the fourth day, lights were placed in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, to rule over the day and the night, to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good.

What God created good, however, suddenly became very dark when the slithering serpent infected our first parents with sickness through his deceit and guile. The serpent tempted them to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the midst of the garden, the tree that would open their eyes to the darkness.

And so they ate, and their eyes were opened, and they no longer saw the goodness of God’s creation, with its richness and diversity and complexity. Instead, their eyes were now lowered in shame at their nakedness as they heard the sound of God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. Now they knew fear—fear of total darkness, fear of a life without God. From this moment on, Adam and all his children would be infected with the virus of sin and death, and darkness would reign over them.

If we are honest with ourselves, we must confess that we are Adam's poor, miserable children, that his disobedience has infected us to our very core, and there is nothing good in us, only darkness. As St. Paul said, "Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned" (Rom 5:12).

3.

Jesus' first act after his Baptism was to do what we could not do. The second, greater Adam was led by the Spirit into the darkness of the wilderness to be tempted by the evil one. Jesus was God's very Son, and the devil knew that the only way to defeat Jesus was to get him to forsake his Sonship, his cross, his destiny of suffering the full darkness of those three hours on Calvary, where God's violence and anger against Satan's lies and our disobedience were unleashed upon Jesus in the most violent moment the world has ever known.

4.

Satan was smart, and he was subtle. He said to Jesus, "Grab a little of the glory now, Jesus, because you can. Turn these stones into bread; throw yourself down from the temple—God's angels will protect you; bow down and worship me, and all these things will be yours." But Jesus knew his destiny was the darkness of the cross. He fought off Satan's attempt to keep him from his appointment with death. And Jesus fought Satan with the only weapon that could defeat him. Jesus spoke the creative Word into the darkness, into the nothingness of the wilderness, for he knew what the psalmist said was true: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps 119:105). The living Word of this second, greater Adam gave light to Jesus' path all the way to Golgotha, a light shining even now in the deepest darkness.

Satan will make one more attempt to keep Jesus from the cross. In another garden outside Jerusalem, Jesus sees the cup of God's wrath against our sin, the cup he must drink on Calvary. He looks over the abyss and sees the horror of the darkness he must enter on our behalf, and he cries, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will. . . . My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done" (Mt 26:39, 42).

Adam and Eve could not say this. You cannot say this, for you are their children. Only Jesus can look into the horror of our darkness and faithfully do his Father's will; only God's fully human Son can do what we cannot do: "For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous" (Rom 5:19). Only through

suffering and death is God making right what has gone wrong—to enter the darkness and bring forth light in the resurrection of his body from the dead. Jesus makes right what has gone wrong by taking on Satan in the wilderness, in the Garden of Gethsemane, on the cross, and triumphing—and then lightening our darkness with the light of his resurrected flesh.

Jesus' cross is where you see both your salvation and the pattern of your life. When your suffering becomes so intense and the darkness so deep, trace on your forehead the baptismal cross that binds you to Jesus, who continues to feed you with his very body and blood at his table, and then in Jesus say, "Not my will, but thy will, be done."

When you enter darkness, when you succumb to temptations, Jesus is there, present with you, overcoming the darkness because his light is always with you. As the author of Hebrews said, "For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. . . . For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 2:18; 4:15).

Those who suffer through the darkness know that there is nowhere to go but to Jesus, just as Jesus knew there was nowhere to go but to the Word of life during those forty dark days of hunger and temptation in the wilderness.

WHEN YOU ENTER A GREAT DARKNESS, KNOW THAT CHRIST WENT INTO THE WILDERNESS AND BATTLED THE EVIL ONE FOR YOU,

and he is always with you and he is always in you, shining his light into the deep recesses of your life. Deep down in the darkness there is only one source of light, and that light is Jesus.

5.

Jesus knows you are battling the evil one; he even gives you a song to sing: the soldier's psalm, Psalm 91, on which is based today's Introit. Your Baptism has enlisted you as foot soldiers on the frontline of the war against Satan, and though the battle is waging all around you, though you are surrounded by darkness, you fear nothing. Covered by God's angels, Jesus' Lenten greeting to you is this: "When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation" (Ps 91:15–16).

As we sing during our evening prayer "Jesus Christ is the Light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome. Stay with us, Lord, for it is evening, and

the day is almost over. Let Your light scatter the darkness and illumine Your Church” (*LSB*, p. 243). Do not be afraid of the darkness, for only in the darkness do we truly let go and let God be God.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.