



1616 W. Mequon Road, Mequon WI 53092
(262)241-3121 www.stjohnsmequon.org
Email: office@stjohnsmequon.org
Pastor James Tiefel
(262) 853-9723 (cell#)
Email: pastortiefel@gmail.com

The First Sunday in Lent

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Tested and Tried in Temptation

The Sundays of the season of Lent take us on a journey with Jesus into conflict and confrontation. The appointed Gospels tell of the challenges he faced—challenges we also face in our lives. The words we hear lead us to believe that we can overcome these conflicts through the conquering power of Christ. Our focus on this day is Jesus' triumph over Satan's temptations.

First Reading

Genesis 22:1-18

God challenges Abraham's faith.

Second Reading

Romans 8:31-39

God did not spare his own Son.

Gospel

Mark 1:12-15

Jesus endures temptation and proclaims the good news.

Sermon

Genesis 22:1-18

Introduction – There are times in our lives—and thankfully, they don't come very often—when we have to make decisions that have life-changing effects on us or on people we love. The surgeon is honest and admits the operation will cure me or kill me. My aging parents either need to go to a care facility or I have to care for them in my home. I have to break the engagement now or I have to be committed to marriage. I have to face up to my friend's addiction or I let it kill him.

Everyone one of these decisions is bound to change my life. Many of you know this from your own experience. You get advice from all kinds of voices all day long and then at night you lie awake and hear more voices. Is the voice I hear the voice of God or the voice of the devil? Is God telling me to do something right and good and loving or is the devil coaxing me to something wrong and bad and selfish? Is God testing me or is the devil tempting me?

If you've ever been in a dilemma like this you can understand at least a little what Abraham was going through in the First Reading for today. Some of you know Abraham's story. God called him to go to a new land—we know it as Palestine today—and promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation—as many descendants as there were stars in the sky or dust on the earth. Trouble was Abraham was 100 and his wife was 75. Abraham tried to fix this by adopting a son and then fathering an illegitimate son, but God said no, that's not how it works. The son of my promise will be your son and Sarah's son. Sarah laughed out loud. And then she got pregnant! Nine months later Isaac was born. Problem solved, right? Well, kind of.

1. Sometime later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.” Talk about a ton of bricks or a load of cement! Now we have to understand something right here. God never intended that Abraham would really sacrifice Isaac. This was a test. God wanted Abraham to come to grips with his loyalty to God. He wanted Abraham to dig down into the depths of his being to decide how important God was to him. He wanted Abraham to stop conniving and controlling and become totally committed to God. There would be no human sacrifice in Moriah, not on this day. But Abraham didn’t know that. The heathens and the pagans who lived around him sacrificed children to their idols all the time. Abraham had to believe this was real, that God really meant this. And God heightened the command: **Take your son, your only son, the son you love, the son you named.** Abraham had to face the question. Whom do I love more: God or my son? And then there was this scenario: If this command is from God, then God’s promise fails. So maybe this command is from Satan. Impossible situation.

I’m not going to retell the whole story word for word. Abraham got ready to go to Moriah and took Isaac and a couple servants along. He loaded the wood on a donkey and they went. Three days later they got where God wanted them to be. Abraham told the servants to stay put. Isaac carried the wood and Abraham carried the fire and they went. You heard the chit-chat: “Where is the lamb?” “God will provide.” And they went. **When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.** For the sake of God Abraham did not spare his own son. In Abraham’s mind Isaac was dead. In Abraham’s mind God came first, always first. Abraham feared, loved, and trusted God above all things.

It’s never been that dramatic for us. Our tests and temptations aren’t that gut-wrenching. But they’re very real and they almost always set up decisions for God or against him or for Satan or against him. The colleague who insults me at work, the classmate who steals my homework, the neighbor who lies to my face—Do I forgive or not forgive? The anger I feel, the prejudice I hold, the lust that arouses me—Do I get rid of it or not? Cheating on my taxes, claiming more hours than I worked, refusing to own up to my mistakes—Do I admit it or not? Lazy for the Word, bored with worship, cheap with my offerings—do I change or not? My sickness, my pain, the certainty of my death—God’s loving ways or his angry punishment? The list could be longer, but it doesn’t need to be. My life and your life are filled with situations and experiences that force us to make choices. God sends a test that strengthens my faith. If I pass the test I find myself closer to him. If I fail the test I find myself drifting from him. Satan sends a temptation to ruin my faith. If I resist the temptation, I drown him and put him back in his place. If I give in to temptation, I follow him and he leads me to his place.

There have been times in our lives when we have built the altar, laid down the wood, started the fire, and raised the knife. With the power of faith we have made our choice for the Lord. As it were we have not spared our son. But there have been many times—and we know this is true—when we have scattered the wood and extinguished the fire and thrown the knife down. We refused to carry out God’s commands and rejected his will for our lives. We doubted his love and defied his promises. You want me to say that in plain English? Day in and day out, in this way and that, we make our choice with the devil. There it is.

2. In his own way, Abraham did not spare his own son. The angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. “Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your

son, your only son.” Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide.

What the Lord provided was a substitute sacrifice: the ram instead of Isaac. With the ram instead of Isaac the promise stayed in place. Isaac was still there, still the heir, still the son from whom would come a people as **numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore**. By faith Abraham made his choice for the Lord and in his own heart he did not spare his own son. By grace the Lord accepted Abraham’s sacrifice of faith and supplied a substitute—which is what he intended to do all along.

In the Gospel for today we see the substitute God intended to provide all along: ***[Immediately after his baptism], the Spirit sent Jesus out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.*** The devil had you and me; we’ve already admitted that. But he did not have the substitute; he did not have Jesus. And so Satan came after Jesus. Every day for 40 days Satan tried to do to Jesus what he does to us every day. He tempted Jesus to step away from God’s will, to abandon God’s plan, to steer clear of the cross. And Satan didn’t stop in the wilderness. He tried to derail Jesus with the words of others: demon-possessed, enemies, sometimes even by Jesus’ own disciples. **Jesus was tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.** He refused to budge to Satan, he made his choice for God, he went to the cross with our sins on his back. And then, on another mountain, Mt Calvary, God provided a substitute. **God did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all.** With Jesus instead of us, the promise is still in place. God forgives our sins, he makes us his children, he assures us of heaven. And all the other things we need in life? **He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?**

Every day, in so many different ways, you and I have to do what Abraham did: we have to decide for God or for Satan. In all kinds of situations and circumstances, we have to ask ourselves: What is more important to me? Life as I’d like it or life with God? Again and again we have to balance the tests God sends us with the temptations that come from the devil. When we fail the test or give in to the temptation Jesus is here with his good news to forgive us. And in the same gospel he is here to bring us into the castle of his kingdom where he provides protection and power. With his strength we can build the altar and arrange the wood and light the fire and raise the knife and follow his call.