

Sermon for February 17, 2013 – Lent 1

Hebrews 4:14-16

Theme: Triumph in Temptation

- 1) *Jesus was triumphant for us.*
- 2) *With Jesus' help we are also able to triumph.*

¹⁴ *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.* ¹⁵ *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin.* ¹⁶ *Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

Have you ever felt like giving up? What Christian hasn't! Temptation surrounds us all the time – temptation to sin, temptation to doubt and temptation to despair. The world entices us with forbidden pleasures. We know what God says in his holy law – and yet, as it happened to Achan in our Old Testament lesson, sometimes that thing which God forbids glitters so beautifully. We begin to covet that which God does not want us to have. And then we sin. Then comes the guilt: “We fell into sin yet again! We’ve disobeyed God!”

But is there a God to disobey? The devil and world tell us no. They tell us not to worry – that we are merely burdening ourselves unnecessarily with fairy tale stories. “Look at all the divisions in Christendom! Look at how Christians treat each other so poorly! If there is a God, why would he allow this? Why won't He show himself? Why won't He debunk all the scientists and their theories – if He really exists? If He speaks the truth, if he loves you, why does he allow so much pain in your life? Why does He allow you to be tempted – if He doesn't want you to sin?” And thus seeds of doubt are planted in our minds. We pray to God for an answer, but we don't seem to get one. We feel so overwhelmed at times. Who will save us from our thoughts? Should we just give up?

The original recipients of the Biblical book of Hebrews were tempted to give up their faith. These Jewish converts to Christianity were being persecuted, and this persecution seemed to grow. On top of their daily battle with their sinful natures, their own countrymen considered them traitors for believing in Christ. Families were torn apart. Parents disavowed children. Former friends betrayed them. Was it worth it? Was their faith properly placed in Christ? They were tempted to give up in so many ways.

That is why the LORD inspired the letter to the Hebrews to be written – to show us that our faith in Jesus is not in vain. He is the fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecy. He is our true God and Savior. Through faith in him we have access to God, we are his dearly loved children, and – with His strength – we are able to overcome temptation.

Let us look at just a small snippet of this wonderful letter to the Hebrews and find strength to endure, under the theme: **Triumph in Temptation:** 1) *Jesus was triumphant for us.* 2) *With Jesus' help we are also able to triumph.*

Part One: Jesus was triumphant for us.

Our text begins: ¹⁴ *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.* ¹⁵ *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin.*

These passages must have brought great comfort for those struggling Jewish Christians – and with a little explanation, it will give comfort to us as well.

In order to understand this passage, we have to understand a little bit of Jewish culture. The High Priest was very important to the Jews. Only he was allowed to approach God's throne – the cover, or mercy seat, of the Ark of the Covenant which stood behind a thick curtain in the temple. That thick curtain represents sin which separates us from God. Once a year the High Priest would offer a sacrifice and go behind the curtain to sprinkle the “mercy seat” with blood in order to atone for the sins of the people. He would pray that God would forgive the people and strengthen them in their faith.

Now, it's one thing to have a high priest to pray for you – it is even better to have the great High Priest which every earthly High Priest represented: Jesus. He is the very Son of God. He not only went behind the curtain with the sacrifice of himself for our sins, He tore the curtain in two. He didn't merely enter an earthly replication of God's throne room, He entered heaven itself. He stands before His Father who loves him and pleads on our behalf. He says: "Dear Father, see I have done your will. I have shed my blood to forgive their sins. Dearest Father, I understand what they are going through. I understand their weakness. Yes, their sin is their fault alone; but, dear Father, the devil is relentless with his attacks – I know, because I experienced them. He and his evil angels are everywhere, using everything to get those you have given me to fall. He never gives up. Yes, Father, they should simply hold on to me in faith and not sin, but they are much too weak to do so without our aid. Therefore, dear Father, forgive their sins for my sake and remember them no more. See, I have given them my righteousness – my perfect record of keeping the law – to be their own. My righteousness belongs to them. Send them the Holy Spirit and instruct them in your Word. Help them dear Father."

And the Father answers: "Yes, dear Son, I will do as you ask – for you have done what I asked and paid for every single one of their sins. I will forgive them, for your sake. Your righteousness is their righteousness. Your triumph over temptation is their triumph. I will send them the Holy Spirit through the Word and Sacraments to strengthen their faith in you and to encourage them not to give up, but to turn away from sin. When I look at them, I will see you and love them as I love you. I have chosen them to believe you and receive eternal life. The world will hate them, as it hated you. They will stand under the shadow of your cross, but as I have loved you, so I will love them. I will strengthen them as I strengthened you. I welcome them to come directly to me in prayer – to stand our presence and ask whatever they wish in your name. I will listen to them as I listen to you, for when I see them – I see you, and your record of righteousness covering them. If they sin – I will rebuke them, but only in love. For I do not want them to lose the salvation you won for them. I do not want them to fall away, my Son."

Do you see why it is so beautifully comforting to have a Jesus as our great High Priest, dwelling in the heavens? He is interceding to the Father on our behalf! He is concerned about us and, most importantly, He gives us his own perfect righteousness to be our own. This is the first and most important way we find triumph over temptation: in God's eyes Christians are already triumphant. Why? Because through faith we are clothed in Christ's righteousness.

Part Two: With Jesus' help we are also able to triumph.

Because we have such a great High Priest who knows our weakness intimately, who forgives us our sins, who intercedes to His Father on our behalf, who gives us His righteousness as a free gift, who invites us to ask His Father for anything in His name and promises to answer us according to His good and gracious will: ¹⁶ *Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

As I mentioned before: Jesus not only went behind the curtain to the mercy seat of God, He tore the curtain in two - thereby showing that the wall of sin that divided us from God has been removed once for all. He went to the actual throne of grace in heaven, and bids us to approach this throne ourselves - covered in His righteousness. And in prayer we do just that. In prayer we come before God's throne of grace. We ask him to be merciful to us - for we need his pity and mercy. We ask him to be gracious to us - to forgive our sins and help us overcome temptation.

And do you know what? When we pray in faith - trusting in Christ - God hears our prayers and helps us; not necessarily by taking the temptations and trials away, but by giving us strength to overcome them.

Imagine for a moment a father teaching his son the art of wood working. There is something difficult that the father needs the son to learn, but it can only be learned through experience - through trial and error. The son attempts to do what his father tells him, but fails miserably. He tries again, and fails. He tries again, and fails. The son starts feeling bad. He wants to give up because he can't get it right. He thinks he will never get it right. Then the father tells his son not to give up, that he loves his son and will help him. It will take time and practice, but he will get it. He will help him as much as he can, but part of that help means working patiently until he gets it. And with the father's help, he does get it - and is able to make the most beautiful artistic designs.

This is how our Heavenly Father works with us. He wants us to grow in our faith so that it can produce glorious works that draw attention to Christ. The only way we will grow in this area is by having our faith exercised. And so God allows trials and temptations to come our way. He knows that we won't be able to keep his law perfectly. He knows that we are weak.

But he wants us to keep trying. He is there to help us. If we get frustrated with ourselves, He wants us to come to him so that He can reassure us of His love and forgiveness. He sends us his Spirit to instruct us through His Word. And he helps us mature through this training, so that we can overcome temptation and grow in our trust and love in him.

The author of Hebrews express these thoughts later on, when He writes: ⁷ *Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?* ⁸ *If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.* ⁹ *Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live!* ¹⁰ *Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.* ¹¹ *No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.*” (Hebrews 12:7-11)

Let me go back to the thoughts that introduced this sermon. When those strong temptations come that try to get us to give up avoiding sin and give up looking to Jesus for forgiveness and give up on our faith altogether, remember our sermon text for this morning. Remember that you have a great High Priest who is in heaven who has atoned for your sin, who has triumphed over temptation for you and invites you to come to Him for mercy and help. Trust that He will help you – not necessarily by taking the temptations and trials away, but by forgiving your failures and giving you strength to endure. He is training you, and through your training He will help you triumph over temptation. Amen.