

Who is your greatest hero? With the Olympics, you might think of an Olympian. Or maybe some other sports star, perhaps a movie star, music star. You might think of someone on social media, a video game hero, a character in a book. Perhaps your greatest hero is a family member or a friend. Your greatest hero may be able to do a quintuple flipperoodoo - until she can't. Your greatest hero might be that someone who always says what you want to hear, always does what you want, always looks with just the right look - until they don't. Your greatest hero may always seem to be there for you - until they aren't. And then we're let down in a way that can hurt worse than death.

Instead of "who's your greatest hero?" how about the opposite - Who's your greatest enemy? You might think of some bully, someone who's always picking, poking, finding fault with what you do; someone at home, at work, a neighbor who makes your life miserable. Just the thought of that question brings back some awful memories. But in our lessons today, we meet someone worse. Someone determined to cut you off from love and blessing. Someone out to make you his - his prey, his pawn, his victim, his agent of evil, his trophy catch in hell. Who's that greatest enemy? The biggest liar in your life - the devil.

Now think back to your greatest hero. We need someone more than the world's fastest and funniest, don't we? We need someone more than a pretend hero. Someone more than a hero who makes us feel good and loved, who makes us feel smart and important. Why? We have an enemy out there more real than any make-believe hero. We have an enemy out there who is a master manipulator of feelings. We have an enemy out there so devious and dangerous We need a hero who can do more than look good and sound good; we need a hero that can do more than make us feel good; we need a hero who can put our greatest enemy in his place.

In our lesson today, we meet that hero in Jesus. This is so key - our lesson isn't just "look at Jesus and see how to fight the devil." No, our lesson is first and foremost - "look at Jesus and see your victory." Let's get to the action.

First temptation - Jesus hadn't eaten for forty days and forty nights. Can you imagine how hungry, how weak, Jesus was? Imagine yourself after just four days of hunger - what would you be willing to do for a bite of bread? The devil figured he had found Jesus' weak spot; so he attacked: "**If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.**" Sounds harmless enough, doesn't it? "Jesus,

you're the Son of God, aren't you? You can make stones into bread, can't you? So why don't you take care of yourself? Go ahead and feed yourself." Sounds harmless, doesn't it? But the devil's menu wasn't harmless. The temptation wasn't just, "Feed yourself." The temptation was: "You can't trust God. Look where he put you; and what has he done to take care of you? You can't trust God to take care of you. You have to take care of yourself. You can't trust God's way; you have to look out for yourself, your way."

Sound familiar? You might be hungry, hungry for some thing, some one, that God isn't giving you. Life might be hard, and living God's way might seem to make life even harder. So what does the devil say? He offers the easy way out - "Help yourself, God wants you to be happy, doesn't he?"

Do we have the faith and the strength to tell the devil: "In good times or bad, whether happy or hurting - I trust God to take care of me? God's way is the right way even if it hurts"?

Jesus did. He had the strength and the faith to stand firm. He didn't fall for the devil's lies, but he fought back. How? With the word of God: "**It is written: `Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.**" Bread and comfort don't give life, but the Word of God gives life. With an empty belly, or worse, with an empty heart, I don't know that I'd have the strength, the faith, to put the devil in his place. But Jesus did. He put the devil in his place for you and for me.

Round Two

The devil lost round one. But he didn't give up. He sees Jesus has a strong trust in God, too strong to break, so in Round 2 the devil tries to use Jesus' faith against him.

The devil takes Jesus to the highest point of the temple. "**If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: `he will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.**" "If you're really the Son of God, then God will take care of you, won't he? If you're really the Son of God – show me and show the world how much you trust God. Trust God and jump." What was the devil trying to get Jesus to do? To use God rather than follow God, to use God as a safety net in going his own way instead of God's way, to use God as an accomplice in going his own way instead of God's way. If Jesus would have jumped he

wouldn't have been trusting himself in God's hands. He would have been taking himself out of God's plan and God's hands; he would have been going his way instead of God's way, yet still expecting God to protect him -- like telling God, "I'm going to do things my way instead of your way, but I expect you to save me anyway." That's not trusting God; that's tempting God.

That's not always easy to see. Time and again I miss it. When we use our faith as an excuse for carelessness - "It doesn't matter what I do, God will keep me safe" When we use our faith as an excuse for laziness - "I don't need to go to church; I don't need to read my Bible; God will keep me close" When we use our forgiveness as a license to sin - "It'll be alright; God will forgive me" ... that's not trusting God; that's tempting God.

Jesus saw what the devil was trying to do. So what did Jesus do? He fought back with the Word: "**It is also written: do not put the Lord your God to the test.**" Jesus passed the test, perfect score. With Jesus, that's the way God sees you and your score - passed and perfect.

Round 3

This time the devil takes Jesus to a high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and all their splendor. "**All this I give to you, if you will bow down and worship me.**" Jesus had come to win the world back from the devil. God had said it would cost him his life. But here the devil was offering Jesus an easy way out - "Easy-peasy. Just bow down to me and everything is yours."

What if the devil were to make us that offer? Everything we need, everything we want, or maybe just a little help with the bills? All we'd have to do is cheat a little here, ignore God a little there. What if the devil were to offer us an extra 15 minutes if we skipped the home devotion? What if the devil were to offer us another hour, or another morning for fun and games, if we just skipped church and Bible Study? What if the devil were to offer us a 10% raise to help pay the bills if we just skimmed on our offerings? At what price would the devil have you bowing down to him?

Jesus didn't bow down. He stood up to the devil: "**Away from me Satan! For it is written 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'**" Jesus doesn't get suckered, does he?

What does that mean for us? Victory! It doesn't always look that way or feel that way, does it? The devil still comes after us. He tries to tempt us and sweet-talk us into sin. He tries to rant and rave us into feeling guilty and afraid. If God left it up to us to put the devil in his place, the devil would still have us. But God didn't leave it up to us. God sent Jesus to destroy the works of the devil. When the devil threw his worst at Jesus, (look at our lesson) Jesus stayed at his best. When the devil brought out the worst in us, (look at the cross) Jesus took our worst to the cross and washed it away. Today that Jesus is alive with you and for you. He's put the devil in his place and by his word he'll keep the devil in his place. What does that mean for us? It doesn't matter what the devil throws at you. You have Jesus as your Champion! You have His Word as your power! We get to win! Amen.

THE SERVICE

IN OUR WORLD TODAY ... we are faced and surrounded by peoples and powers who challenge us and trouble us - some just for the here and now, some are out to trouble us without end.

IN OUR WORSHIP TODAY ... we see how Jesus stood up and stood in for us - not just for our here and now troubles, but especially to deliver us from the one who would trouble us without end.

OPENING HYMN

"I Lay My Sins on Jesus"

Hymn 798

I lay my sins on Jesus,
the spotless Lamb of God;
he bears them all and frees us
from the accursèd load.

I bring my guilt to Jesus
to wash my crimson stains
white in his blood most precious
till not a spot remains.

I lay my wants on Jesus,
all fullness dwells in him;
he heals all my diseases,
my soul he does redeem.

I lay my griefs on Jesus,
my burdens and my cares;
he from them all releases,
he all my sorrows shares.

I rest my soul on Jesus,
this weary soul of mine;
his right hand me embraces,
I in his arms recline.

I love the name of Jesus,

Immanuel, Christ, the Lord;
like fragrance on the breezes
his name abroad is poured.

I long to be like Jesus,
meek, loving, lowly, mild;
I long to be like Jesus,
the Father's holy child.
I long to be with Jesus
amid the heav'nly throng,
to sing with saints his praises,
to learn the angels' song.

OPENING SENTENCES

Our help is in the name of the Lord.
Who made heaven and earth.

CONFESSION

Brothers and sisters in Christ, during the days of Lent, we fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of God.

The time of Lent reminds us that to know Christ and the power of his resurrection, we must also know the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.

As disciples of the Lord Jesus, we are called to struggle against everything that leads us away from love of God and neighbor. In our struggle and in our times of trouble, we know that with Jesus we have God's promise and power.

I invite you, now, to confess your sins, ask our Father for forgiveness, and commit yourselves to this struggle.

HYMN

“Lord, Have Mercy”
Hymn 652 vs. 1

For what we have done and left undone
we fall on your countless mercies.
For sins that are known and those unknown
we call on your name so holy.
For envy and pride, for closing our eyes;
for scorning our very neighbor.
In thought, word, and deed we’ve failed you, our King;
how deeply we need a Savior. (Refrain I)

Lord, have mercy, Christ, have mercy, Lord, have mercy on us.
Lord, have mercy, Christ, have mercy, Lord, have mercy on us.

ABSOLUTION

Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, does not desire the death of sinners but rather that they turn from their wickedness and live. Therefore, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

During these days of Lent, let us implore God to give us renewal and his Holy Spirit. May we continue to abide in the true faith and at the last be received by him through the merits of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

HYMN

“Lord, Have Mercy”
Hymn 652 vs. 2

For what you have done, your life of love
you perfectly lived, we praise you.
Though tempted and tried, you fixed your eyes;
you finished the work God gave you.
And there on the tree, a King among thieves,
you bled for a world’s betrayal.
You loved to the end, our merciful friend;
how pure and forever faithful. (Refrain II)

Lord, have mercy, Christ, have mercy, Lord, have mercy on us.
Lord, have mercy, Christ, have mercy, Lord, have mercy on us.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Mighty God and Father, our Lord Jesus walked into the wilderness to face the devil's temptations, but he did not succumb to Satan's lies or falter in his resolve to save the world from the prison of hell. Bolster our faith by his mighty victory that we may battle against the forces of evil with courage and confidence; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

FIRST READING

Genesis 3:1–15

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.' "

"You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"

The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."

Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?"

The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

So the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this,

“Cursed are you above all livestock
and all wild animals!
You will crawl on your belly
and you will eat dust
all the days of your life.
And I will put enmity
between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and hers;
he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel.”

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

PSALM OF THE DAY

Psalm 46E

If God is for us, who can be against us?
God is our salvation, always by our side.

God is our refuge and our strength,
an ever present aid,
and therefore, though the earth be moved,
we will not be afraid;
though hills into the seas be cast,
though foaming waters roar,
the LORD of hosts is by our side,
a refuge strong and sure. (Refrain)

A river flows whose streams make glad
the city of our God,
the holy dwelling of the LORD,
the place of God's abode.
Since God is in the midst of it,
our safety is secure;
the LORD of hosts is by our side,
a refuge strong and sure. (Refrain)

Behold the wondrous deeds of God,
who causes wars to cease,
the weapons of the strong destroyed,
God brings abiding peace.
“Be still and know that I am God,
exalted evermore;”
the LORD of hosts is by our side,
a refuge strong and sure. (Refrain)

SECOND READING

Romans 5:17–19

If, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ! Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Hebrews 4:15

We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses; we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.

GOSPEL

Matthew 4:1–11

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”

Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written:

“ He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”

Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”

Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Praise be to you, O Christ!

APOSTLES’ CREED

**I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth.**

**I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.**

He descended into hell.

The third day he rose again from the dead.

He ascended into heaven

and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Christian Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.**

HYMN OF THE DAY

"Jesus, Your Blood and Righteousness"

Hymn 573

Jesus, your blood and righteousness
my beauty are, my glorious dress;
mid flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
with joy shall I lift up my head.

Bold shall I stand in that great day;
who can a word against me say?
Fully absolved through these I am
from sin and fear, from guilt and shame.

Lord, I believe your precious blood,
which at the very throne of God
pleads for the captives' liberty,
was also shed in love for me.

Lord, I believe, were sinners more
than sands upon the ocean shore,
you have for all a ransom paid,
for all a full atonement made.

When from the dust of death I rise
to claim my mansion in the skies,
this then shall be my only plea:
Jesus has lived and died for me.

Jesus, be worshiped endlessly!
Your boundless mercy has for me,
for me and all your hands have made,
an everlasting ransom paid.

SERMON

Matthew 4:1-11

HYMN

"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"

Hymn 864

A mighty fortress is our God,
a trusty shield and weapon;
he helps us free from ev'ry need
that has us now o'ertaken.

The ancient evil foe
now means to work us woe;
deep guile and awful might
are his dread arms in fight;
on earth is not his equal.

With might of ours can naught be done,
soon were our loss effected;
but for us fights the valiant one
whom God himself elected.
You ask who this may be?
Christ Jesus, it is he,
the Lord of hosts his name,
from age to age the same,
he holds the field forever.

Though devils all the world should fill,
all eager to devour us,
we tremble not, we fear no ill;
they shall not overpow'r us.
The prince of darkness still
may scowl fierce as he will,
his raging harms us none.
He's judged; the deed is done;
one little word can fell him.

The Word they still shall let remain
nor any thanks have for it;
he's by our side upon the plain
with his good gifts and Spirit.
And should they take our life,
goods, honor, child, and wife,
though all of these be gone,

our victory is won;
the kingdom's ours forever!

OFFERING

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CHOIR

“Nothing But the Blood of Jesus”
by Robert Lowry

What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus

[Chorus]

Oh! precious is the flow
That makes me white as snow; Oh,
no other fount I know
Nothing but the blood of Jesus

For my cleansing, this I see
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
For my pardon, this my plea,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus

[Chorus]

Nothing can my sin erase
This is all my hope and peace
This is all my righteousness
Nothing but the blood of Jesus
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

What can wash a- way my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
What can make me whole a-gain?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus

[Chorus]

PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

Gracious Father, after his baptism your Son faced the stern attacks of Satan who tried to derail his journey to the cross. On this day we rejoice in Jesus' victory in the wilderness and praise him for his ultimate triumph over the works of the devil.

Send us your Spirit that we may believe this truth and apply it in our lives.

Satan and his followers seek to overturn our faith and love every day. They seek to separate us from you and to destroy our relationship with your Son. **Give us wisdom to be alert for their attacks and to recognize the danger they bring.**

Protect us as we endure temptation. Keep us from thinking that sins are harmless. Keep us from becoming Satan's victims.

Forgive us and restore us when we give in to him.

Give us courage to warn those we love about the dangers of the devil's temptations. Lead us to speak the truth in love so that our family and friends may discern evil and step back from error and sin.

Move us to share the horror of Satan's power honestly and to offer your forgiveness in love.

Keep in your care all who are struggling with pain, battling with sickness, and facing death. [Especially bless... *here name the person and the cause of the petition.*] Spare your people from Satan's temptations in their difficult hours and strengthen them with the promise of your Son's ultimate victory over sin, death, and the grave.

Help us to support them as we can and to keep them in our prayers.

Protect us, gracious God, from the power of Satan, the allure of the world, and the foolishness of our sinful nature.

By your Word and Sacraments, work in us to believe that we are more than conquerors through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

BLESSING

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.

The Lord look on you with favor and give you peace. **Amen.**

CLOSING HYMN

Prayer Employ You"

"Rise! To Arms! With

Hymn 871

Rise! To arms! With prayer employ you,
O Christians, lest the foe destroy you,
for Satan has designed your fall.

Wield God's Word, a weapon glorious;
against each foe you'll be victorious,
for God will set you o'er them all.

Fear not the prince of hell,
here is Immanuel!

Sing hosanna!

The strong ones yield
to Christ, our shield,
and we as conqu'rors hold the field.

Cast afar this world's vain pleasure
and boldly strive for heav'nly treasure.

Be steadfast in the Savior's might.

Trust the Lord, who stands beside you,
for Jesus from all harm will hide you.

By faith you'll conquer in the fight.

Take courage, weary soul!

Look forward to the goal!

**Joy awaits you.
The race, then, run;
your battle done,
the crown of glory will be won.**

**Jesus, all your children cherish,
and keep them that they never perish
whom you have purchased with your blood.
Let new life to us be given
that we may look to you in heaven
whenever fearful is our mood.
Your Spirit on us pour
that we may love you more,
hearts o'erflowing;
and then shall we,
from sin set free,
sing praise through all eternity.**

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Reflections on the latest WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership

The WELS National Conference on Lutheran Leadership, one of the largest gatherings of WELS and Evangelical Lutheran Synod members, was held Jan. 19–21 in Chicago. The event was a huge success, with attendees offering many positive comments. Jonathan Hein, coordinator of WELS Congregational Services, provides the following reflections on the conference:

The 2026 leadership conference centered on the theme of WELS' recently adopted long-range plan, "Christ through us." The aim was to draw people back to the heart of Christian leadership: not what we accomplish through Christ, but what Christ continues to do through his people. Some highlights included the following:

- Four keynotes touched on major cultural needs for ministry efforts: courage, character, critical thinking, curiosity, and better collaboration between all God’s people—men and women. (About a third of attendees were women.) One congregation president said, “The final day’s emphasis on critical thinking—paired with a serious call to better recognize the ideas and gifts of women—will force us to ask different questions about whether our structure really encourages the full body of Christ to serve together.”
- Sixty-nine breakouts allowed participants to examine “best practices”—tactical approaches to ministry around WELS that the Lord seems to be blessing. Breakouts on leadership development were especially popular. One lay leader shared, “What struck me was how many breakouts focused on growing as leaders, not growing numbers. The emphasis on character and collaboration was refreshing and deeply needed.” Also popular were breakouts on revitalizing congregations and schools. A pastor noted, “After a tough few years in ministry, this was encouraging in the best sense. Seeing what the Lord is blessing elsewhere didn’t make me feel behind. It reminded me that he’s still building his church, and that faithful work—even in small places—matters.”
- One in ten attendees was under the age of 24. This was an intentional effort, not just to equip the next generation of leaders but also to hear their insights on how to better reach and disciple people their age. One high school-aged attendee wrote, “It was encouraging to know that our perspectives mattered. It felt like my church was inviting us to help shape ministry now.”
- Worship was inspiring and encouraging, grounding everything else in the forgiveness and peace Christ provides. Music was led by 20 students from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wis. The three preachers represented different aspects of leadership: in the parish, in the synod, and in training future workers. Twenty area pastors helped with distribution of the Lord’s Supper to the 1,600 WELS attendees.

Rather than minimizing current challenges in congregational life, the conference addressed them openly. Declining participation in some contexts, leadership fatigue, and cultural change were named honestly—yet always in light of Christ’s ongoing faithfulness to his church. One leader shared, “I appreciated the honesty. No one pretended ministry is easy right now. But the focus kept coming back to Christ’s promises instead of our anxiety. That kind of clarity gives you courage to keep serving.”

With that confidence, leaders returned to their congregations, schools, and ministries reminded that the future of the church does not rest on perfect plans or flawless leadership but on a faithful Savior who continues to work through his people.

Thanks to Rev. Hein for his summary and to all who planned, presented, and attended this conference.

Serving with you in Christ,

WELS President Mark Schroeder