

Hebrews 4:14-16

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

In Every Way

I.

There is a problem. Where does that phrase take you?

Each one of us has issues to deal with in our own personal lives: illness, finances, relationships, and more. All the issues of your personal life are affected by other things out in the world. Perhaps that's where your mind goes. Two years ago our lives were changed by a microscopic virus. Repercussions have reverberated and touched everything in life, from the big, overriding issues to the smallest details. If that wasn't enough, events in far-away countries have tugged at our emotions and have also affected our economy.

None of that is where the phrase "there is a problem" is meant to take you. Oh, perhaps all those things are valid. There are problems in all of them.

But there is an underlying problem, a problem that is the root cause of all those other problems of life. That problem is sin.

The problem of sin is what led to God implementing all the Old Testament rites of worship and the regulations surrounding them. There were rituals of purification for the priests to go through before they would conduct the daily sacrifices. When it came time for the Great Day of Atonement, there were even *more* preparations to be made. It required *days* of preparation. The high priest had to make sacrifices for his own sins before he went behind the curtain of the holy of holies to sacrifice for the sins of the people.

In all the sacrifices there was a promise, the same promise made to Adam and Eve when they first fell into sin. God would send someone who would deal with the problem of sin.

Could it be true? How would it be done? Paul once talked about those Old Testament promises as shadows. Shadows never clearly define things. You can't quite make out the details when all you see is a shadow. If something is lurking in the shadows, it's hard to tell exactly what that thing is. As for the shadows of promise, they hinted that what was coming was better, somehow.

II.

What was coming was "A great high priest, who has gone through the heavens, namely, Jesus the Son of God" (Hebrews 4:14, EHV). What is it that made him so great? Today's reading says he is: "One who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15, EHV).

What, exactly, does that mean? Today's Gospel reading recorded Jesus' period of temptation in the wilderness. Perhaps your attention was grabbed by the three temptations specifically mentioned and you missed one key line: "He was tempted by the Devil for forty days" (Luke 4:2, EHV).

40 days is a long time. It's more than a month. The period of Lent is 40 days. The

Sundays during that time don't count toward the 40, because every Sunday is considered a mini-Easter, even though we leave out the Alleluias in Lent.

Today's sermon text says of Jesus: "[He] has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15, EHV). That wasn't just the 40 days that the Gospel reading speaks of, when Satan bombarded him in the wilderness; it was his whole life.

How do *you* do with temptation? I guess you could say that the Devil doesn't have to work very hard at tempting unbelievers. The only sin that condemns a person to hell is unbelief, and they already fall into that category. Satan just wants to keep them from hearing the Good News.

Perhaps he works a little bit harder with believers. He wants to turn you away from the truth and turn you aside to the myths of unbelief. A little more effort. Maybe even a *lot* more effort. After all, you have the Word of God to fight back with against the Devil and his raging and his temptations. As Luther said in today's hymn of the day: "one little word can fell him." One little word from the Word of God. So he attacks you harder. Just because you fell him once with the Word of God doesn't mean he won't try again—from another angle, and with a little more intensity. It's easy to slip. Failure isn't an option, it's the norm.

The writer to the Hebrews says: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15, EHV).

Failure *wasn't* the norm for Jesus. Think about *his* life and *his* battles against the Devil. Satan knew a little secret, even if you haven't given it much thought. If Jesus failed—just once—Satan would have us all. One sin. Just a little one. One sin would do in the whole work of salvation.

Can you imagine the intensity of the onslaught? None of us can. Perhaps the verse from Hebrews understates things. Jesus was, indeed, tempted in every way we are, but to the extreme—to the ultimate lengths. Satan just needed *one*.

How long would *you* have lasted in the wilderness with nothing to do but be tempted by the Devil? Luke reports: "[Jesus] was tempted by the Devil for forty days. He did not eat anything during those days. When they came to an end, he was hungry. ³The Devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread'" (Luke 4:2-3, EHV).

One day. One day would have been tempting if I had the power of Jesus to turn stones into bread. Three or four days, tops, and I would have succumbed. We will confess in our creed in just a few minutes that Jesus was "truly human." Hunger is powerful. In the hands of Satan, human hunger was a powerful tool of temptation. Yet Jesus did not yield.

This is the Jesus we have. Strong in the face of temptation. Unyielding, though there was intense pressure. He was a "Rock of obedience," as today's theme of the day put it.

III.

"We have a great high priest, who has gone through the heavens, namely, Jesus the Son of God" (Hebrews 4:14, EHV). At the Day of Atonement, the high priest would take the blood of the special sacrifice and go behind the curtain to the holy of holies. Behind that curtain was something called the Mercy Seat. The Mercy Seat was the cover on the Ark of the Covenant that held the 10 commandments and some manna and Aaron's staff that had bloomed. It was there, on the mercy seat, that God had promised his presence. There he was with his people. The Mercy Seat was obscured by the incense shoved in before the high priest entered. No one may see the face of God and live.

Jesus didn't go through the curtain. He went through the heavens, not into the holy of holies to the place God promised to dwell with his people, but into the very presence of God,

before the very face of God. He could do it because he didn't need the blood of a sacrificial animal to mask his own sins and the sins of the people. He had faced every temptation to the extreme and remained without sin. He could go in to the throne room of heaven as the perfect sacrifice for all sins that was needed. God's real anger over every single sin has been appeased by the sacrifice of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

IV.

This reading used to be the reading to close out the season of Lent on Good Friday. Now it is the reading for the First Sunday in Lent. Jesus overcoming temptation is a perfect way to start this season. We have a great high priest who was tempted in every way, but was without sin; we have a great high priest who offered himself for our sins once and for all.

"Therefore, since we have a great high priest, who has gone through the heavens, namely, Jesus the Son of God, let us continue to hold on to our confession" (Hebrews 4:14, EHV). This Jesus is the great high priest we walk behind through the season of Lent and marvel yet again that he was willing to do all this for us, poor miserable creatures though we are. Hold firmly to this confession. Hold firmly to the gospel in which God has revealed this great high priest to us.

"So let us approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16, EHV). You and I are going to be tempted again. In fact, we are going to succumb to temptation again. Even after hearing how Jesus withstood the bombardments of temptation, we give in at the slightest provocation. When you do give in, turn immediately to the throne of grace. Jesus has made his sacrifice specifically so that you can be assured of the forgiveness of your sins. You will find God's mercy. You will find grace to help in time of need. God will give you the one little word that can fell Satan for you to use in your battle today.

"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15, EHV). Jesus knows. Jesus understands. He has been through it all...and more.

One popular version of the Bible, the NIV, in its most recent update in 2011, changed the word "sympathize" to "empathize." Perhaps they did so because English speaking people have begun to use the word "sympathy" to express pity or sorrow for someone else's misfortune. "Empathy" indicates an ability to understand and share the feelings of another.

I'm not so sure it was a good choice. If I empathize with you, I might try to understand what you are going through, though I have not gone through it myself. Sympathy has another meaning: a common *experience*.

Jesus experienced the weakness of the human psyche. He took on the devil in the wilderness in this same equipment that I have—the same equipment *you* have. He took him on as one who was...and is... "truly human." He took Satan on and he won.

Because Jesus can truly sympathize with you and the battle you go through with Satan every day, you have a place to go to find mercy and grace in every time of need. He is your Savior in every way. Amen.