

Sermon – Luke 4:1-13
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Grace Lutheran Church
1 Lent – Year C
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“Once More Unto the Breach”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Several weeks ago, we made a quick weekend trip to Wisconsin to spend some time playing with family in a snowy, winter wonderland. Goodness knows they've had enough snow up there. And play we did. Hockey was played, snow forts were excavated, and hills were sped down upon sleds. Good fun, all in all. But at the end of the first day, one of Erika's cousins – we'll call him Andrew, because that's his name – discovered that he had lost his keys in the snow. He didn't know when they had fallen out of his coat pocket, and he obviously didn't know where. He just knew that they were gone. We spent some time looking in the darkness, but honestly, there wasn't much we could do at night. More snow fell. We spent the next day retracing our steps – skating on the pond, crawling through the tunnels in the snow forts, sledding down the hills – hoping to find the keys. For most of the day, we didn't have any luck, except insofar as it was lucky to be sledding, skating, and snow fortting. But the keys remained lost. It was only at the end of the next day, after we started the drive home, that Andrew found his keys. Trampled down by boot heels, covered up by fresh snow, we feared they wouldn't be found until the spring melt. It was only through the careful retracing of steps that what was lost became found.
2. This past Wednesday, marked with ashen crosses, we entered into Lent. This is a season of entering the wilderness, of remembering what we've lost and looking to the One who has found it; the One who has found us. A quick

refresher: God creates the world. God gives us the keys to paradise but we promptly toss them aside. The garden is lost, the floodwaters rise and recede, the Tower of Babel is cast down and the people are scattered. In Genesis 12, God does a new thing. God calls to a wandering Aramean, Abram, and his wife, Sarai. Through the first five books of the Old Testament, the story of this family and their descendants is told. The grandchildren of their grandchildren become enslaved in Egypt, bound for 400 years. Then, freedom. The promise of the Promise Land is renewed. The gift of the Law is given, a covenant that will guide the people to good and abundant living on the Land. It is a mountaintop moment, an experience of the divine, a blessed gift from God to the people. And what do they do? They throw it away, turning to the golden calf of thinking that they knew best. For forty years they wander in punishment, and only then are the people allowed to enter the Land. So Moses speaks to them, words we heard today in our first reading. Remember who you are, Moses says. Remember where you came from. Remember who is giving you this land. And what do they do? They throw it away. By the end of the Book of Judges, all hell has broken loose, with everyone doing what was right in their own eyes. Israel's failure is particular, but it is also emblematic of our own. Humanity, gifted and blessed by God with all that we could want or need, has chosen instead to live apart from God; has chosen gods that are little more than idolatrous self-projections.

3. But even though the people continue to drop the keys, to lose sight of God, God does not lose sight of them. God becomes one of them – one of us – in the person of Jesus Christ. To begin the process of finding what was lost, Jesus retraces our steps on our behalf. As Israel met God on the mountain, so does Jesus encounter the divine at the river, named now by the Father as the Son. As the people were filled with covenantal promise, so is Jesus filled with the Spirit. And the Spirit drives Jesus into our wilderness to wander, empty, for forty days. Just as God's people wandered for forty years, learning to

depend only on God, so too does Jesus empty himself of everything but the Spirit within him. But in the test that the people failed, Jesus wins the victory.

4. The devil came to Jesus that day so cool, calm, and convincing. And he came armed with the good stuff, trying to get all hell to break loose. No cheap thrills that we know are bad for us; none of the small crimes we think we can get away with. No, the devil came to offer Jesus the chance to do good: to turn stones to bread and feed the world; to take the political reins from Rome and to rule the world with love; to throw himself down from the temple and let God's angels bear him up. It is interesting to imagine but impossible to know what Jesus was thinking. We can't get inside his head; we don't know if he was strong in his denials or if he wavered for a moment. But we do know what sustained him in the struggle: his single-minded focus on God, empowered by his self-emptying that made room for the fullness of the Holy Spirit within him. He said "no" because to say "yes" would have been to draw him away from his identity as the Son of God. He would live not by bread alone, but by every word from the mouth of God. He would deny himself power so that he could focus on serving God. He would refuse to put his God to the test because the time had not yet come. And when it did come, he would not jump off the temple so that angels could save him. He would jump headlong into a cross-shaped death, forsaking the angels, to save you and me.
5. The people got lost because they forgot who they were: God's chosen, holy, and beloved people. They made golden calves and chased foreign gods and insisted on having kings just like their neighbors. And we, too, forget who we are. We are chosen, holy, and beloved. We are the ones that God has called to feed the world; we don't need bread from stones to do so. We are the ones that God calls to rule the world with peace and justice; we don't need a supernatural ruler to do what should come naturally to us. And we are the ones who should trust God, rather than putting God to the test. But we have failed, and in so doing, we have gotten ourselves good and lost. So here

- comes Jesus, retracing our steps for us; walking into the wilderness to find us; and standing toe to toe with the devil on our behalf. To save us, and to set us free to do what we should have been doing already. We are the ones who have forgotten who we are. Jesus resists and defeats the devil simply by remembering who he is: God's chosen, beloved, Spirit-filled Son.
6. Jesus' temptation, of course, is not analogous to our own. As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "When it's our turn, none of us is going to get the Son of God test. We're going to get the regular Adam and Eve test, which means that the devil won't need much more than an all-you-can-eat buffet and a tax refund to turn our heads." Nor is this an invitation to consider how our Lenten disciplines mirror our Lord's temptation. There may be good reasons to give up chocolate and booze, and even better reasons to take up works of love and missions of mercy, but Jesus is up to something different in the wilderness. He is winning the battle that we could not win for ourselves; he is doing so by retracing our missteps with firm-footed steps; and he is doing so for our sake – to undo our undoing. We stand now within his victory, and only within his death and resurrection do we stand a chance at resisting the tempter. For it is only in the death and resurrection of Jesus, who never forgot who he was, the Son of God, that we remember and become who we are, daughters and sons of God for the sake of Jesus Christ.
 7. While it's tempting to imagine that this time of Lent is about our journey of faith, it is first and foremost about Jesus retracing the journey to a new end and a new beginning. It's about Jesus, filled with the Spirit, who went into the wilderness of our sin and death to dig us out and bring us home. Jesus, who never forgot who he was. Jesus, who creates us to be who we are. Jesus, who dove headlong into death that we would live. Jesus, who would let nothing turn him from this purpose. Jesus, the Son of God, in whose death and resurrection we are alive, strengthened, and finally given the victory. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.