

“The Firewall of Faith”

“Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”

Late last year, Susan and I decided that it was time to buy a new laptop, since the one we had used for years was becoming obsolete. When we went to Best Buy in London, we were overwhelmed by the choices, and thankfully we were helped by a very knowledgeable salesperson who guided us to make a choice with which we are very happy. Among the many choices and options that were presented to us, one item that was not an option was virus protection and a strong internet firewall. Sadly, one of the realities of the internet age is that the more sophisticated our technology becomes the more sophisticated thieves and hackers have become in stealing our sensitive information, infecting our computers with an endless variety of viruses, and even taking computer systems hostage with “ransomware” that can be removed only by paying a ransom to these cybercriminals. This latter threat became real here in Stratford, when in September 2019 the computers at City Hall were attacked and taken hostage, requiring the city to pay a \$75,000 ransom to unlock all the information that is stored on our city’s computers. Such episodes remind us of the importance of a strong computer firewall, which is a network system that monitors and controls incoming and outgoing network traffic based on predetermined security rules, establishing a barrier between a trusted internal network and an untrusted external network. As one computer security expert explained, *“your computer is vulnerable every time when it is connected to the internet.”*

Firewalls in computer systems are a modern example of the need for security to protect persons, families, and nations against external attacks that threaten their security and very lives. Many cities in Europe are surrounded by walls that were built to protect the populace from invading armies. Low-lying areas along the seacoast often have strong seawalls built to protect homes and properties from hurricanes and high tides. My years of seminary in Philadelphia taught me the importance of being secure in an urban setting, always locking the door of our residence and making certain that no one who might threaten the security of the students and staff gain entrance to the campus. We erect firewalls to protect us from threats to our lives and the lives of those for whom we are responsible; the assumption in such security measures is that threats to our safety are not a matter of if they will occur, but when they will happen and how we are ready to respond to them.

In each of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) Jesus’ baptism is followed by his temptation in the wilderness which precedes his public ministry. Matthew’s Gospel offers the details of this ordeal at the beginning of today’s Gospel lesson, reporting that *“Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.”* (Matthew 4:1-2). What follows is a verbal battle between Jesus and Satan in which the Tempter tries to divert the obedient Son of God from his path. This submission to temptation is not an accident or a matter of Jesus being victimized by demonic power; since he was *“led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil,”* it is a part of Jesus’ obedience to God that will be a hallmark of his life and ministry (as in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prays *“my Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.”* – 26:39). The period of forty days and forty nights is reminiscent of Moses’ experience in Exodus:

- “The LORD said to Moses: Write these words; in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel. He was there with the LORD for forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments.” – Exodus 34:27-28.

As the true Son of God who recapitulates Israel’s experience in coming out of Egypt (*“This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son.’”* – 2:15), Jesus is tested in the wilderness and remains obedient to God, specifically refusing to worship any other gods. *“In contrast to Israel in the wilderness, whose faith wavered until it was restored my miraculous manna, Jesus is hungry but remains faithful without a miracle.”* (M. Eugene Boring).

At the point when he is most vulnerable, the Tempter appears before Jesus. The disputed issue in their encounter is not whether Jesus is the Son of God, but what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God; *“a question is posed through the interaction between Jesus and the Great Tempter that gets at the question of Jesus’ identity.”* (Melinda Quivik). The Devil’s three temptations confront Jesus with all the desires of a normal human being: food, simplistic thinking, and power. When Jesus’ forty day fast has left him famished, Satan confronts him with a plausible temptation: *“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”* (4:3). In contrast to Luke’s account in which the Devil tempts Jesus to *“command this stone to become a loaf of bread”* (Luke 4:3), in Matthew’s account the stones and loaves are plural, indicating that the temptation is for more than satisfying Jesus’ personal hunger. It was a feature of some Jewish expectations of the Messiah that he would reproduce the miracle of the manna in the wilderness and that there would be a lavish supply of food in the messianic era. Jesus is challenged to show that he qualifies as Messiah by these criteria. In tempting him to turn many stones into many loaves of bread, Satan tempts Jesus to use his divine power to produce food for all, corresponding to popular messianic expectations and carrying enormous political power for one who displays the ability to provide food for all.

Jesus’ response is not to address Satan directly but to quote from Scripture, specifically the words of Deuteronomy that *“one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”* (Deuteronomy 4:2). Jesus is not saying that providing for the needs of hungry people is unimportant; in fact, his words and deeds throughout his ministry will show the vital importance of providing food for hungry people, as in the feeding of the Five Thousand in which *“all ate and were filled; and the took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full”* (14:20) and in praising the acts of the blessed who will *“inherit the kingdom prepared for you before the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food”* (25:34-35). While Jesus teaches his followers to pray that God *“give us this day our daily bread”* (6:11), he insists that a truly human life must be nourished by the Word of God.

- “The Word of God is always with them, they live in it, they study it unceasingly, reading, teaching, preaching, punishing, exhorting, comforting, and the like. By so doing they accomplish so much among the chosen people of God that henceforth that people trust no longer in any self-appointed work or services, however wonderful their name, however radiant their light. Henceforth they build on God’s unfathomable grace and mercy alone, which are promised and revealed to us in Christ.” – Martin Luther, 1537.

The Devil’s second temptation is for Jesus to make a spectacular demonstration that he is the Son of God, one that will gain him fame and notoriety among the population: *“Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw*

yourself down" (4:5-6). The reference to "the holy city" has eschatological overtones connected with the future fulfillment of God's promises (*"And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."* – Revelation 21:2). Satan attempts to convince Jesus by quoting from Scripture for his own purpose, the words of the Psalmist that *"he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."* (Psalm 91:11-12) – proof that Holy Scripture can be misused for evil purposes. But Jesus is not fooled by this satanic abuse of the Word of God; he resists the temptations of the Devil by once again quoting from Deuteronomy which warns that one should not *"put the LORD your God to the test"* (Deuteronomy 6:16).

The third temptation that confronts Jesus is perhaps the most powerful, the temptation of power: *"Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.'"* (4:8-9). To rule the 'kingdoms of the world' is to assume the role currently occupied by the Roman emperor, and to do so by capitulating to the devil's kingship. But Jesus will not deviate from worshiping the one true God, resisting Satan's temptation for a third time with the word of Scripture, once again from Deuteronomy: *"The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear."* (Deuteronomy 6:13). For the first time, Jesus adds his own words: *"Away with you, Satan!"* (4:10). After being thwarted three times in his attempts to tempt Jesus away from his divine purpose, *"the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him."* (4:11). Having resisted the very real temptations of the devil, Jesus begins his ministry among God's people by proclaiming *"repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."* (4:17).

- "He will not let the Tempter make himself give up his self for the sake of assuaging his physical desires, his hunger. He will not let the Tempter narrow his understanding of God's word so that it becomes a litmus test for faith. He will not yearn for or grab influence in the way of human beings who find themselves unsatisfied unless they have status that is admired by other humans. In short, Jesus will not yearn primarily to be given what feeds the physical body or hunger to know what God's word means or grab importance." – Melinda Quivik.

Jesus and his disciples will continue to struggle against demonic powers throughout the Gospels; at the end of his account of the temptation, Luke reports that *"when the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time."* (Luke 4:13). The temptation to power was once again present when, after having fed the Five Thousand, *"Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, [so] he withdrew again to the mountain by himself."* (John 6:15). The temptation to place oneself in a position superior to others was present among the disciples when they demanded that Jesus *"grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory"* (Mark 10:37), failing to realize that they were following the one who *"came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."* (10:45). Perhaps the greatest temptation of all was when Jesus was being crucified, and *"those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.'"* (Matthew 27:39-40). Jesus is tempted right to the end of his life to turn away from following the path the Lord has placed before him, but he is able to resist the temptations of the devil through the most powerful force of all: the Word of God, the "firewall of faith" that gives us the power to resist all temptations that would seek to draw us away from loving and serving God.

- "There is a twofold armor with which the devil is slain and which he fears: 1) to listen unceasingly to the Word of God, to instruct oneself in it, and to be comforted and strengthened

by it; 2) then, when temptation and struggle come upon us, to lift up our hearts to that same Word and cry to God, invoking him for help ... This perseverance Christians will be taught by temptation and calamity with which they are constantly oppressed by the devil, the world, and the flesh, so that they must ever keep their heads up, watching for the assault of the enemy who neither sleeps for a moment nor takes his ease.” – Martin Luther, 1539.

The danger of the temptations of the devil infecting the body of the Church and destroying our faith and understanding of God’s purpose for God’s people has been a struggle for Christians from the very beginning. Paul often addressed churches that had been infected by the influence of false teachers so that they were *“quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.”* (Galatians 1:6-7). The words of the First Letter of Peter warn the faithful that *“like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.”* (1 Peter 5:8-9). As Jesus endured temptations throughout his life, we who bear his name and are called to be his disciples will also be assaulted by trials and temptations that will seek to draw us away from God, but as St. Augustine declared, *“we cannot prevent trials and temptations from overtaking us, but with out prayer and our invocation of God’s assistance, we can stave off their victory over us.”* God has given us the same “firewall of faith” that enabled Jesus to withstand the forces of evil that were seeking to overtake him: the Word of God, the message that is *“a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path”* (Psalm 119:105), the sure and certain message of God’s gracious love that speaks to us clearly and empowers us to resist even the mightiest forces of opposition. Knowing that we will face such powerful forces, Paul encourages us to *“be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil ... Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.”* (Ephesians 6:10-11, 13).

- “The living words of God heal our hurts and soften our hearts; they clear our vision and guide our feet. Like a lifeline strung from the beginning of time to the end, they show us a way through all the storms of culture, nature, and history. They show us the way to the Word beyond all our words, in whose presence we shall be made eloquent at last.” – Barbara Brown Taylor.

The antivirus firewalls that were installed in our laptop need to be constantly updated in order to protect us against new and increasingly insidious viruses that are an ever-present danger in our time. Likewise, our firewall against the threats of the one who would draw us away from God and tempt us down a path that leads us away from the source of light and life must constantly be updated, which means that we must continue to heed our Lord’s commandment to *“continue in my word [so that] you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”* (John 8:31-32). The Word of God is our strong and sure defense, our “firewall of faith” that will protect us against all that seeks to destroy our faith and our witness to the truth of God’s Holy Word. The Word of the Lord has the power to keep God’s faithful people *“steadfast in your word, protect and comfort them in times of trial, defend them against all enemies of the gospel, and bestow on the church your saving peace”* (Reformation Day Prayer). May we turn to God’s Word, the “firewall of faith,” to protect us and keep us steadfast in the Word, which is our source of light and life, now and forever.

Amen.