

One of the recurring themes in the season of Lent is that of testing. In the first Sunday in Lent, we hear about Jesus being tested by Satan in the wilderness. The next Sunday, a Canaanite woman's faith is tested and increased by Jesus. Last Sunday, Jesus is again tested, this time by Jews who say that He is in league with Beelzebub.

Now this morning, we again have testing – though today's Gospel reading actually has two different tests. One is more obvious, one, less so. But in both tests, and both then and now, we see that Jesus is the one who delivers from testing.

The first test that comes along in our Gospel reading is perhaps the more obvious one: the test of need. Jesus and His disciples have crossed over the Sea of Galilee and gone up onto the mountain. From the accounts of this event in the other Gospels, we know this was to be a bit of a retreat, a period of rest for Christ and the disciples. It is also Jesus taking His disciples aside to teach them in a closer, more intimate setting.

Yet no sooner do they get up onto the mountain than what do they see? Here comes the crowd! This multitude had been following Jesus, hearing His teaching, and especially seeing the signs that He had mercifully done in healing the sick. And here they come again! Now, put yourself in the place of the disciples. You know these people need healing, they need Jesus, but it's just nonstop!

With that frame of mind, consider what Jesus says to them next. He asks: "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" The question is spoken to Philip, who as a "local" from the village of Bethsaida would have known what the villages had available, but it's really directed to all of them. "What can we do to take care of all these people?"

Philip was probably a bit dumbfounded at first, before replying, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little." We can understand his reply, as the Bible tells us there were about five thousand men in that crowd, not counting women and children. So you're looking at, what, ten, twelve, fifteen thousand mouths?

This would be like every resident of Carbon County showing up to one of our Midweek meals, and me asking you all, "Well, how are we going to feed everyone?" Not only would thousands of dollars not cut it – remember, one denarius was a full day's wage – but where are you going to get the food? You'd wipe out the shelves of Walmart and City Market and still come up short. And tiny little fishing villages like Bethsaida don't have near the supply like we would today.

It would seem that Jesus is asking his disciples the impossible. Why does He do this? Well, the text tells us the reason: "[Jesus] said this to test him, for He Himself knew what He would do." Jesus is testing His disciples here. It's similar to His words to the Canaanite woman from two weeks ago.

Jesus isn't asking Philip this to be mean or condescending. He's asking in order to stir His disciples' faith, to see if they'll look in the right place, put their trust in Him. Note that Jesus puts it forth as a question – giving Philip the opportunity to confess that Jesus alone can do such things.

And we do see faith stirred. We read, “One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ‘There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?’” Andrew grasps a little. He notes that there’s a boy here with a sack lunch, maybe that’s something... but then doubt comes. “What are they for so many?” He sees the instrument, the means, that God has provided, but he just can’t believe that God could do so much with so little.

Not only can God do it, though, He does do it. And in fact, as the text makes clear, He already knew He was going to do it before He even asked. As with the fate of the Canaanite woman’s daughter, the care and provision for the crowd was never in doubt. Jesus loved every person in that crowd, and so He was going to take care to them.

As true God, He used His power to multiply those five loaves and two fish into a meal for thousands, satisfying the hunger of every person there. And as true man, Jesus showed forth His perfect trust in His Father by giving thanks – not after all was said and done, but before the loaves had even started to multiply.

Such is the Lord’s generosity that there is even some left over – twelve baskets full! The Lord had tested the disciples by putting a great, even “impossible,” need before them, and then providing for that need in a way that both exceeded what was needed and which only He could do.

Our Lord places tests like this before us as well. They aren’t always seemingly impossible to meet, though sometimes they are. Perhaps He asks us to care for another person, someone whose needs seem so great that there doesn’t seem to be any way we can meet them.

Or maybe we are put in a situation where it seems that, to provide for ourselves and our families, we’ll have to compromise on what we know to be true.

Maybe we look at the survival of the church, even our own congregation, and are tempted to think what so many have thought throughout the ages, that unless we “get with the times” and leave Scriptural truths for worldly and cultural ideas, we’ll die out.

Yet the Lord never fails to provide for His children. Our Father has told us ask Him for our daily bread, and because He a good and loving God, He will give us what we have been told to pray for.

Even when it seems that our bodies are failing, that doesn’t mean that God is failing us. It just means that our Lord is preparing to bring us from this life into the life to come, which is immeasurably better.

When it comes to the Church, we’re tempted to doubt as Andrew doubted, that the means God has provided are insufficient. What is one Book among so many competing ideas? What is simple water, bread and wine? Yet in the hands of the Almighty God, that Book and the Word it contains can and does transform hearts and bring lost souls to light. That water, joined to the Word, grants new and everlasting life. That bread and wine are joined to the body and blood of Jesus Christ Himself, and grant forgiveness, life, and salvation to all who receive it worthily.

Christ promises that even the gates of hell will not prevail against His Church, and His word is truth. Our God is the God, who, as Scripture states, “is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think.”

God provides for us superabundantly, just as He did for that great crowd of thousands. This superabundance, though, can also be a test. This is the second, and perhaps less obvious test present in the reading, what we might call the test of plenty, as opposed to the first test of need.

So Jesus had just fed the crowds, working an incredible miracle. Why did He do this? For one, He loved those people, saw their needs, and had compassion on them. And second, He was directing them to His teaching. We don't have the exact words Jesus taught them as they gathered, but it's clear from the context and from His actions that He was showing them that He was the new and greater Moses, the one whom Moses had prophesied would come after him.

Consider the connections: both cross a sea, going away from those who had kept the people in captivity, be that the physical captivity of the Egyptians or the captivity to false teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Both lead a great crowd into the wilderness, where it seems that there is no way for the thousands of people to be fed. And both miraculously feed the people, though Moses is merely the one who calls on God and Jesus is the God who actually feeds. Thus, Jesus is the the Messiah, the one promised to come after Moses.

This is what He's wanting the people to see and believe, and by believing be saved. Now, the people do see the start of the truth, like Andrew seeing the boy's lunch as a start. Thus, they confess Jesus to be the Prophet, the one who would follow Moses.

But they totally miss the point of what Moses, and all the Old Testament prophets, said about the coming Messiah. The people don't focus on the heavenly, eternal aspect of what has happened. Instead, they look at the worldly blessings. They see all this bread that Jesus has just made from nowhere, and they think, "This is a good thing. We should keep this going!"

They want Jesus to be a bread king, not a heavenly king. If He can multiply loaves, He can probably multiply gold and silver, making Jerusalem richer than it was in the days of Solomon! If He has power like Moses, maybe He can bring down some of those plagues on the hated Romans and get them to leave, restoring Judean pride and prosperity. With Jesus as their earthly king, they can have all the glories of the world – which, remember, is what Satan offered to Jesus in the wilderness.

The Lord has given them great blessing, but sadly their hearts are still trapped by the desires of this life, and so they make an idol out of the blessing and try to make Jesus into something He isn't.

He has come, not to rule in Jerusalem, but to rule by His Spirit in their hearts. He has come to destroy His enemy and set His people free, but that enemy isn't the Roman Empire; it's the devil and his minions. He has come to grant abundance, not in this life, but in the life to come.

Seeing their idolatrous intent, Jesus has compassion and acts. He leaves, before they can attempt such a sin. But He doesn't leave them for good. Note how the account ends. "Perceiving then that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by Himself." This isn't just Jesus departing, and that's that. This is the Holy Spirit showing His literary genius as He inspires St. John to recount this. This is epic foreshadowing.

Later on, when another Passover is at hand, Jesus will be taken by force. He will be mockingly declared a king, both by the crown of thorns and the sign Pontius Pilate has placed above His head. He will be alone on a mountain – Golgotha – betrayed, abandoned, even forsaken by His Father.

Yet on that mountain, Jesus will bring about a miracle much, much greater than by the Sea of Galilee. There, He will not feed thousands; He will atone for the sin of trillions. He will satisfy not earthly hunger and thirst, but the hunger and thirst for righteousness. He will provide the means, not to sustain people until their next meal, but until they join Him in the heavenly feast which has no end.

Jesus will address the temptation of plenty by miraculously providing something only He can give – a heart that truly fears, loves, and trusts in Him.

He provides this for us still today. And that is absolutely essential, because we are very much tempted by plenty, by worldly abundance and prosperity. Our own church body's history bears this out.

Last month was the 50th anniversary of the walkout at the St. Louis seminary, where a large majority of both faculty and students left the campus after investigations revealed false, unbiblical teaching had been taking place there. How did we get to that point?

Well, in the decades leading up to that, the Missouri Synod had been growing by leaps and bounds. Thoughts of being the largest Lutheran church in America, one of the most influential in the world, came calling. How to accomplish this? For one, bring in theology professors who got their degrees from prestigious institutions in Germany. Concordia St. Louis would have the most esteemed faculty of any Lutheran institution in the US, rivaling anywhere in the world!

But... those German schools had been infected with what is called higher criticism, a doubt that the Bible really is true in what it says. And we knew it. But we hired those guys anyway, who then proceeded to teach seminarians, future pastors, to question the truth of God's word.

The other thing we did in our pursuit of plenty was to seek union with other Lutheran bodies in our country. Now, we are to seek unity – the Bible tells us this. But it is to be true unity, a unity grounded in God's word. Instead, we sought to compromise, to pursue a lesser unity. If we could have had some mergers, we'd have been the largest Lutheran Church in the United States!

We just had to ignore some of what the Bible said, or what exactly the Bible is. This pursuit of bigger numbers, increased funding, greater prestige just about cost our denomination its grip on biblical truth. By the grace of God, He pulled us back from this. But our pursuit of plenty caused a lot of pain and division, scars that are still felt today.

We're tempted to this pursuit of plenty, of comfort, of worldly good still today. Just reflect a bit. Let's say you were offered a job that paid twice what your current job paid, with better retirement benefits and insurance, but required you to work most Sundays, would you be tempted to take it? Would you give up hearing God's word for the sake of worldly wealth?

Or let's say you are getting ready to retire, to move somewhere where maybe you don't have to shovel quite as much snow or something. Which plays more into your choice of location – the presence of a good healthcare system, or the presence of a faithful church?

Or maybe your kid or grandkid or neighbor kid comes to you and you're talking about what they want to be when they grow up. Which would you emphasize as more important: choosing a career that

they'll enjoy and make a good, comfortable living with, or choosing a path that will let them raise a godly family?

I'm not saying here that education or healthcare or income are bad things – they are blessings that come from God. But so were the bread and fish. When we elevate the blessings given by God – whatever they might be – over God Himself, we've crossed over into idolatry.

Our hearts, just like those of the crowd in our Gospel reading, are tempted to chase after plenty. And like the crowd, our hearts are also healed by the blood of Jesus. In Lent, as we focus on our Lord and His Passion, we're doing so so that we better understand the great victory He has won for us, a victory with spiritual and eternal benefits.

As we focus on His word, as we come before Him in prayer, as we sing His praises, as we eat and drink His true body and blood, we are renewed and strengthened against these temptations. The Lord gives us the ability and desire to leave the paths of this world and follow Him, wherever it may lead.

We have a wonderful example in St. Paul. Consider his familiar words from Philippians 4. "I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me." It isn't only in hard times in which the Apostle relies on Christ. It is at all times, when facing the trials of need and the trials of plenty. Christ is our strength, regardless of our earthly circumstances.

When the Lord puts need before us, we don't have to worry, because our God is the Almighty, and for Him, nothing is impossible. And when the Lord grants us times of plenty, He will continue to call to us by His word and Spirit, that we would not fall into idolatry but rather would use all we've been given to His glory and to the care of our neighbor. Our Lord strengthens us in every trial, that we may have Him as our true King forever.

In the name of Jesus, amen.