

Sermon: First Sunday in Lent
Theme: Sin: Overpromising and Underdelivering
Text: Matthew 4:1-11

⁴ Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² After fasting for forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.'

⁴ Jesus answered, 'It is written: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."' "

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the highest point of the temple. ⁶ '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."' "

⁷ Jesus answered him, 'It is also written: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."' "

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. ⁹ 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.'

¹⁰ Jesus said to him, 'Away from me, Satan! For it is written: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."' ¹¹ Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

It's nine months since the Albanese government was elected. And almost 12 months since we South Australians elected the Malinauskas government. So we're getting to the point where we can see whether these new governments are implementing what they've promised to do. It seems to be a feature of all new governments that they spend most of their first year in office blaming those who went before them for all the problems they face.

Sadly, we've become accustomed to politicians breaking their pre-election promises. We've even coined a phrase, "politician's promise," to describe a statement that can't be believed. We are heartily sick of their overpromising and under-delivering, of spin and half-truths, and the inability to own up to mistakes when they've done something wrong.



We could also say that **overpromising and under-delivering** is one of the key

characteristics of our fallen human nature. This is the hallmark of sin. We can trace it back right to the very beginning. Adam and Eve led an idyllic existence. They were at one with each other and with God their creator. Then the one Jesus calls "**the father of lies**" makes his slimy entrance. "**Did God really say...**" were his first words, words that show that his methodology is to twist the truth. In response to Eve's answer that she and Adam could not eat of the fruit of that one tree, he says:

“You will not certainly die...for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing God and evil.”

This is **over-promising**- the lure of God-like status. The sting behind this promise is that God can't be trusted, and that the first two humans would be better off by themselves. And the result in believing this counterfeit promise? **“Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked...and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden.”** Under-delivery of the first degree. The consequences of our first parent's decision continue to be played out in our own lives, to this very day.



Sin **always** overpromises. And **always** under-delivers. And yet we continue to fall for the same tricks, over and over again. Temptation to sin begins with an idea or an action that appears to promise us something we want or feel that we deserve, but which turns out to be to our detriment. Greed promises fulfillment and pleasure through more and more things, but once we have them, we realise that they are devoid of the power to transform our lives. More stuff does not equal more contentment. Lust promises us someone better than our spouse, but it creates a mere phantom, not a real flesh and blood person, and it can't deliver us a real, authentic relationship. Anger promises us power over another person as we vent our frustration, but after our outburst, all we are left with is fractured relationships and plenty of fences to mend.

That's the way Satan works. He never creates, only undermines, destroys and kill what is life-giving. He has no power in himself, but gets us to use our poor choices to achieve his purposes. And he's remarkably clever at it. As I read during the week:

“Evil may be wrong, but it is not stupid...It does not deal in honest, straightforward and fair competition. It fights dirtily and deceptively, using every clear, double binding truth to trap us and rob us of our own humanity.”

Over-promising. Under-delivering. It's the story of sin and temptation but for one shining exception, Jesus himself. He is, as the book of Hebrews reminds us **“one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin.”** Today we see his confrontation with Satan, who spins what he thinks are the most beguiling lies. His plan is clear; to prise Jesus away from his relationship with his Father, and to divert from his path to the cross.

This battle takes place in the desert, always a place where people are found out. Jesus has just been baptised. The voice of God still resounds in his ears: **“This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased.”** Now it was time for Jesus to learn what it meant to be the obedient Son. The fact that he fasted for forty days and forty nights takes us back to another wilderness, where there the people of Israel spent 40 disobedient and meandering years in the desert. Israel fell at every hurdle. What will this Son do?

Jesus has not eaten for 40 days. Satan homes in on what he perceives is a weak point. He challenges Jesus to use his power to meet his obvious need. **'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.** His aim is to get Jesus to take a divine shortcut, to find the easy way out of this suffering. **"Go on, Jesus, remember how God provided food in the desert, manna from heaven for his people. You can do the same. Serve yourself!"** But Jesus' response is blunt and simple. **"It is written: People do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."** Every Scripture that Jesus uses to rebut Satan comes from the book of Deuteronomy, Moses' farewell sermon to God's people.



Having failed the first time, Satan tries another tack. He decides to twist Scripture for his crooked purposes. He takes Jesus and makes him stand on the top of the temple. **"Jump off"** he says. **'Surely you'll be safe. Remember your Father's promise. He will send his angels, so that you won't even so much as stub your toe. What about it, Jesus? Why don't you just make sure that your Father really does care?** And more than what, you'll make quite an impression. Any publicity is good publicity.

Jesus' relationship with Father is the centre of his life. Satan tries to sow seeds of doubt. Jesus knows that he must walk the path to the cross. That he must die for the sins of all people. Will God come to his aid? Wouldn't it be better to test out God's saving response, before it's too late? **"No,"** Jesus returns serve at Satan. **'It is written do not put the Lord your God to the test."** My Father is faithful and loving. I trust myself to him.

There's a third and final test. Satan shows Jesus, in a split second, all the power, wealth, riches of the world; a kaleidoscope of human authority and glory. **"It's all yours, if you worship me. You are the Messiah. But this is an easier route back to glory. No pain but all the gain."** Jesus again responds as the obedient one. **"Worship the Lord your God and serve him only."** Jesus chosen doing his Father's will and winning our freedom as the greater good, not his own comfort.

Satan over-promises, but Jesus is awake to his lies. He won't allow himself to choose the path that leads to his destruction, and ultimately ours. His strength, his goal, his treasure, is his relationship with Father. He won't manufacture the intervention of his Father to save his own skin. His task is to save ours, and in order to do that, he has to have Jerusalem in view, from the very beginning. His temptation shows us that it won't be a joyride but a hard slog. Satan will continually attack him and attempt to throw him off the track. But Jesus will not be deterred, and he will succeed.

And so what God promises God delivers. This is what Paul celebrates in our second reading. The bad news is that **"by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man,"** shorthand for Adam and the fall in which we daily share. But the good news, the promise fulfilled is this: **"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!"**



This is very good news for us. While our sin is all our own work, saving is all God's. Where Adam failed, and we with him, Jesus didn't. And that's what God wants us to stake our hope on, rather than wallow in our guilt or simmer with frustration at our fallible human nature. God promises an **"abundant provision of grace,"** more than enough of his Holy Spirit to stand against the many temptations that we face every day. As Paul promises: **"And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it."** Knowing God's word intimately, as Jesus did, allows us to stand strong and faithful, hearing God's clear voice when we are in danger of succumbing to temptation.

Sin **Over-promises and under-delivers.** But what God promises he delivers, in Jesus. Amen.

Peace in Christ

Pastor Andrew Brook