

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil.(Matthew 4:1, KJV)

This is a sermon about temptation. Alas, you know what I am talking about. So do I. We have already lost a lot through yielding to temptation, and there is a better life waiting for us. I want this sermon to be an encouragement to you in your Christian life, but if it is not — if something I say should trouble you — then forget everything except for this: that with the Lord there is forgiveness. And so if once again you fall to temptation, then remember the forgiveness of God and get up and start again.

This past Friday, as I took the train up to a hospital in Bronxville, I found myself thinking about our Lord's desert temptations. We know that as a matter of principle, it is good that Jesus triumphed over those temptations. But I was not thinking about principles, but simply about Kathryn Weidmann. I was thinking, "It is good that Jesus triumphed over the devil, because Kathryn needs him. We all need him."

Kathryn needs Jesus because she is in the hospital, with doctors swirling around her. God bless them strong! So Kathryn needs Jesus, but she has him, she belongs to Christ, and knowing her as many of you do, you will not be surprised to hear that she rests in good faith with him. She seems as joyful as always.

We all need Jesus because we all face this world's troubles and sorrows and we need a Saviour. It was good, then, that Jesus triumphed over temptation there in that desert. It was of immense importance, reaching all the way to you and to me.

The esteemed New Testament scholar N.T. Wright has referred to the resurrection of Jesus as the "opening bell" in our Maker's determination

to reclaim and renew his creation¹. The resurrection of Jesus signals that the great counter offensive to save this old earth has commenced. And that is because this Jesus who is resurrected is one who triumphed over temptation. He knew temptation, same as you and me. But unlike you and me, he yielded not. As the Fourth Chapter of Hebrews puts it:

For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.(Hebrews 4:15, NRS)

For how would our misery be improved if the one who defeated death was himself defeated by the devil and the devil's temptations? We have enough of them! We have plenty of generals and rulers who have been defeated on the great battlefield of temptation. But the glory of Easter is that God has raised to everlasting life one of our kind – save for sin. The reason we have hope for this world is that Jesus is alive, and Jesus triumphed over temptation from beginning to end. Jesus is risen to reclaim his creation, and he wants you and me to join him in the battle. It is for this reason that we are baptized: to join Jesus in regaining the world. And therefore, you and I need to stop yielding to temptation. We have

¹ See, for example, this recent interview:
<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1710844,00.html>

important work to do on this earth, and time's awastin'.

In the Sixth Chapter of First Corinthians, there is a fascinating discussion of legal matters. Apparently, some of the Corinthian Christians were bringing lawsuits against each other. Clearly, St. Paul is stunned and troubled by this. His problem with these litigious Corinthians is not that he doubts the secular law courts, but rather that he fears that the Corinthian Christians have failed to understand their own dignity in Christ. As I read aloud St. Paul's comments, please notice his saying about "judges of the world":

¹When any of you has a grievance against another, do you dare to take it to court before the unrighteous, instead of taking it before the saints? ²Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? ³Do you not know that we are to judge angels-- to say nothing of ordinary matters?(I Cor. 6:1-3, NRS)

But you see, if we are to be judges of the world, even judges of the angels, we should stop sinning so much. For sin corrupts our judgment. Yielding to temptation weakens us for the great work ahead of us of reclaiming and renewing this earth upon which we live. How can we judge the world and be a blessing to this world's people, if we keep on sinning so much?

In the matter of temptation, we should try our best to guard our Christian freedom. Now, there are two kinds of sins against freedom. One is the Promethean sin of trying to strong arm God. It is that works righteousness according to which we figure we can lay a claim on heaven because we have managed to do a good deed here or there. Lutheranism has been brilliant through the years of standing on guard against that heresy.

But in the day-to-day life of the Christian, it might be that the opposite sin is the more

important one: it is the discouraging conviction lurking in our hearts that in the end, we *must* yield to temptation. It is our resignation to sin. It is our giving up of the battle as if the case is hopeless. This is a sin against our own freedom.

What is "temptation"? It is the willingness to depart from the Word of God. We find ourselves lured in that direction: to depart from God's Word. Maybe the lure burns, like hot fire in our blood. Maybe the lure is simply steady and relentless, like some gravitational pull, till at last we get worn out by it and suppose that we must yield. Maybe the lure is built so deeply into us that it goes all the way down to our bones and our genetic make-up, so that we can hardly recall a time when we did not have a hot temper or whatever the particular cross we bear. Maybe the lure comes from the id – from wild and restless impulses of the heart we try to suppress and deny.

It doesn't matter, and we should not be overly impressed by the nature of the lure to sin. If God has said, Do thus and you shall live, then let us do thus. I am confident about one thing about the Word of God: We will better soldiers in the reclaiming and rebuilding of this earth if we obey. And we will be better neighbors to our loved ones and to our fellow citizens if we obey.

I do not want to lose sight of the forest for the trees in this matter of temptation. Sometimes we are too hard on ourselves when it comes to the Word of God. I mean, when was a boy, some people felt it was wicked to dance, and I fell for it, in some primitive way. I still can't dance. Some people felt it was wicked to wear jewelry. In the course of church history there have been all kinds of false claims about the Word of God. And so, we have the right to ask ourselves, "Is such and such really the Word of God?" Does God really require us to be skinny like a model? Does God require us to avoid television or rock and roll or movies? Well, when the case is not clear, we have to use our best judgment. Still, sometimes the case is perfectly clear. Sometimes, the temptation is a frank denial of the Word of God, like in today's Gospel where the devil finally takes off the gloves and lures Jesus with all the

glory of the world if only Jesus will fall down and worship him – the devil. Outrageous!

We have lost a lot already through yielding to sin. This thought dawned on me recently when I was reading Martin Luther's whimsical description of the Garden of Eden:

If, then, Adam had remained in the state of innocence, he would have tilled the earth and planted little plots of aromatic herbs, not only without inconvenience but, as it were, in play and with the greatest delight. The children that were born would not have needed their mother's milk for so long a time. Perhaps they would have stood on their feet immediately, as we see in the case of chicks, and would have sought their food without any effort on the part of their parents.
(Luther's *Lectures on Genesis: Volume One*)

By one single word, even by a nod,
Adam would have put bears and lions
to flight.

We have lost a lot through ten million human decisions to give in to temptation — decisions spread across our globe and multiplied day by day. Our earth hardly has a chance, and you and I do not get to live in such a peaceful world as Luther imagined Eden to be. But we sure wish we did, now don't we? The key to it is the Word of God. When the devil tempted Jesus, Jesus steadily answered by quoting the Bible: "It is written, man does not live by bread alone," and so forth.

Clinging to the Word of God is our great defense against the wiles of the devil. And it best prepares us to take our place at the side of the resurrected Jesus, who continues to resist temptation, who continues to be available to be the Savior of Kathryn Weidmann and anyone in need, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.