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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
1/24/2010, The Third Sunday after Epiphany  
Psalm 19, Luke 4:13-21

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

This morning's Gospel story speaks of power -- the "power of the Spirit." I am aiming to relate this power of the Spirit to two other matters: temptation and the holy Law of God. My text comes from the early part of our Gospel Lesson:

<sup>14</sup>And Jesus returned *in the power of the Spirit* into Galilee, and a report concerning him went out through all the surrounding country. (Luke 4:14, RSV)

This mention of our Lord's "power of the Spirit" puts me in mind of a certain triumphant moment in the career of Martin Luther. So, before turning to the story of Jesus and his public ministry, let's jump ahead fifteen hundred years to Luther's time. It is reported that after Luther took his stand at the Diet of Worms (1521), he lifted his arms, in the manner of soldiers, and shouted with a happy countenance. He had just given his famous answer about the Word of God and how he was bound to it:

I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen.

It had not been any easy testimony for Luther to give. He had hesitated. In fact, he had requested an overnight recess before giving his answer, and he had spent that night in fitful prayer. He knew that if he took such a stand, refusing to recant his Reformation convictions, he faced the possibility of arrest and even execution. Indeed, as Luther was escorted away from the main hall, there was a call for his arrest:

As he was going down the stairs, the emperor's Spanish attendant cried, "To the pyre with him!"

Now comes that happy scene when Luther reaches his quarters:

Many accompanied Luther to his quarters. Arriving there, he lifted up his hands in the style of soldiers and shouted with a happy countenance,

“I’ve come through. I’ve come through.” He explained to Spalatin<sup>1</sup>: even if he had a thousand heads he would rather have them all lopped off than recant.<sup>2</sup>

Luther was a man who had been through a spiritual ordeal and had come through triumphant. Then, the Church had a tiger on its leash.

Likewise with Jesus in this morning’s Gospel story. There is an air of triumph here. Jesus has faced deep temptations in the desert, and has conquered every one. He has been sifted by Satan, enticed, offered attractions of sin far beyond any we are likely to know. I mean, none of us is likely to be offered all the power of this world’s kingdoms and the glory thereof if only we would sink into sin. But Jesus was tempted that way:

<sup>5</sup>And the devil, taking him up into an high mountain, shewed unto him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. <sup>6</sup>And the devil said unto him, All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them: for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it. <sup>7</sup>If thou therefore wilt worship me, all shall be thine. (Luke 4:5-7, KJV)

Three times Satan launches his temptations against Jesus. Three times, the devil designed his assaults on the soul of our Lord. Three times Satan disguised himself as an angel of light and sought to beguile Jesus into sin. Millions have fallen before Satan before, aye, hundreds of millions have been defeated by him. Yet Jesus triumphs over Satan. Now he is ready for ministry. He returned from his desert temptations “in the power of the Spirit” says our text. And sin, death, and the devil had best watch out!

So I can imagine Jesus in this morning’s story in the manner of his servant Luther far down the road. I can picture this young man Jesus thrusting his arms into the air, as it were, and shouting with a happy countenance, “I’ve come through, I’ve come through. Satan, watch out!”

Now, how did Jesus triumph? What was his method? What was his strength? Answer, he did what each Christian is called to do: he took up the whole armor of God. We can never hear of that armor too much. We need it if we would triumph over the wiles of the devil. So, let me read for us once again the famous passage from St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, Chapter Six:

<sup>11</sup>Put on the whole armor of God, so that you *may be able* to stand against the wiles of the devil. <sup>12</sup>For our struggle is not against enemies of

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<sup>1</sup> A friend of Luther and counselor to Luther’s prince, Frederick the Wise.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George\\_Spalatin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Spalatin)

<sup>2</sup> Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: His Road to Reformation 1483-1521*, Fortress Press, pg. 461.

blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. <sup>15</sup>As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. <sup>16</sup>With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. <sup>17</sup>Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Ephesians 6:11-17, NRSV)

There! That last one: the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God! That's the one I want to linger with this morning.

Parish Secretary Karen Rombey has told me that she will never forget the teaching of her childhood Missouri Synod pastor who, with great earnestness, told his people: If you go into a church and the Word of God is not there, then get out of that place!

The old pastor was exactly right about that. If the Word does not stand, then the church does not stand, no matter how beautiful, impressive, or benevolent that church might be. Travel a hundred miles if need be to find a church where the Word is in place, where it has not been abandoned, where it has not been traded for a bowl of porridge. Luther never could have stood against the angry mien of Pope and Empire if all he had was his personal notions about things. He did not risk his life on the opinions of the world, but on his study of the Word!

And so it was with Jesus in the wilderness. He conquered Satan by quoting scripture:

<sup>3</sup>And the devil said unto him, If thou be the Son of God, command this stone that it be made bread. <sup>4</sup>And Jesus answered him, saying, *It is written*, That man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God. (Luke 4:3-4, KJV)

With his holy rhythm, Jesus would answer the devil with the words, "It is written," until soon Satan had to flee that place, and leave Jesus in peace.

Do not grieve over God's Word in your life, not even over his commandments, though they constrain you ever so much, for the constraint of our Lord always aims for your good and flows from deep love for you. Think of God's holy Law in this manner: we owe our very existence to the *command* of our Maker who shouted his orders into the dark chaos: "Let there be light! Let there be you! Let there be me!" And therefore, to use the lovely phrase of a friend of our parish, theologian Robert W. Jenson, the holy commandments of God "refresh our being." We were made by God's command, we are preserved by the path he wants us to

tread and by fleeing the paths of sin, and we are made strong and finally joyful by those commands.

This is the testimony of David in this morning's Psalm, Psalm 19. If I were to substitute the word "health" or "fame" for the word "law" in the following verses, you would nod your head in agreement that health and popularity are great things, "sweeter far than honey," "more to be desired than gold," though perhaps you would think such praise to be a bit overmuch, recognizing that such praise probably exceeds their power to deliver. But David is not speaking of health or popularity, but of something even more dear to him, something from which he wished he had never strayed, and something he means to cherish with even more earnestness henceforth. Hear, then, the ancient testimony again:

- <sup>7</sup> The *law of the LORD* is perfect and re- | vives the soul; \*  
the testimony of the LORD is sure and gives wisdom | to the  
innocent.
- <sup>8</sup> The statutes of the LORD are just and re- | joice the heart; \*  
the commandment of the LORD is clear and gives light | to the eyes.
- <sup>9</sup> The fear of the LORD is clean and en- | dures forever; \*  
the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous | altogether.
- <sup>10</sup> More to be desired are they than gold, more than | much fine gold; \*  
sweeter far than honey, than honey | in the comb.
- <sup>11</sup> By them also is your ser- | vant enlightened; \*  
and in keeping them there is | great reward. (Psalm 19:7-11, LBW)

This was the armor Jesus wore in the wilderness. He believed in the holy Law of the Lord. He counted it more to be desired than gold, more than much fine gold. He preferred the commandments of God to the power of all the kingdoms of the earth and to the glory thereof. He took his stand with his heavenly Father's Word, and sin, death, and devil had best watch out. They had a veritable tiger on the leash and this Tiger was out to defeat them!

The time of the desert temptations did Jesus no harm. That fact of being tempted did not weaken him. It is not the temptation which weakens us, but the yielding to temptation, and that, Jesus did not do. I think that you and I will feel in our own lives the same pattern we see in this story if we be true to our baptisms: Jesus triumphs over temptation, and in the "power of the Spirit" he goes into Galilee and commences his public ministry.

Jesus had been given the Spirit in his Baptism. The Spirit descended on him, you will recall, in bodily form there at the Jordan River. In the desert, he both triumphed through that Spirit and preserved that Spirit. He did not start the dreary process of dulling the Spirit within him.

But if we are baptized, we too have been granted this same Spirit. It was poured out upon us. That is, we too were granted permission by our Maker to launch out on a great adventure: the adventure of contending for the Kingdom of God against sin, death, and the devil. Let us treasure that Spirit. Let us not

squander it away through sin. Let us try to break free from that dreary process of dulling the Spirit granted to us in Baptism. And if we have started that dreary process, let us hasten back to our Baptisms through Confession and Absolution, repentance and amendment of life. Above all, let us cherish the armor that Jesus used, especially the Word of God. Do not grieve over the impulses and restraints of God's word, for they all mean us well and aim for growth in our humanity.

Then, world, watch out: I'm taking no prisoners! Then, sin, death, and the devil, tremble again, as you trembled long ago in the presence of Jesus, who survived your ordeals in the wilderness, strode forth in the power of the Spirit, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.