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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Isaiah 55:1-9, 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:1-9
Trials and Temptations

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

This morning's sermon is called "Trials and Temptations." They are not quite the same thing, are they? There is overlap, to be sure. Every "trial" contains within it "temptations" to despair or to escape the trial in some way unworthy of a Christian. Likewise, every "temptation" contains within it a "trial" or a "testing" of our faith. The hot winds of temptation blow upon us, and then faith is no longer easy. The season of spiritual peace gives way to a season of spiritual turmoil and confusion and labor, and the temptation will reveal whether our faith stands or falls. So, these are different things -- trials and temptations -- yet they share together in a blessed promise: that, if we will, God will see us through them safe to yon shore and grant us victory.

My Bible text is from this morning's Epistle Reading. It is a passage that contains a particular Greek word - *peirasmos* - that is exceedingly rich and complex. Indeed, this word is so abundant in meaning that it can be translated as "testing," as the *New Revised Standard Version* puts it, or as "temptation" or as "trial."

Let me start off with the traditional English translation. The *King James Version* (1611) and the *Revised Standard Version* (1952) speak of "temptation." And so, for example, our text is put this way in the *Revised Standard Version*:

No *temptation* has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. (1 Corinthians 10:13, RSV)

Now, I am no grammarian, but as far as I can follow the commentaries, it is also an honorable translation of this dear text to put it in terms of "trials." So, for example, we have the translation of the *New Jerusalem Bible* (1985):

None of the *trials* which have come upon you is more than a human being can stand. You can trust that God will not let you be put to the test beyond your strength, but with any trial will also provide a way out by enabling you to put up with it. (1 Corinthians 10:13, NJB)

As for me in this sermon, I mean to cut the Gordian knot between these two translations by dealing with *both* of them, one after the other. For both seem important to me. It is a great and lovely thought that in any kind of spiritual

suffering, whether it should be temptations to sin or trials of our faith, we need not be undone by those troubles, for God will not press us *too* hard, but will give us a way of escape. I mean to begin with “temptations,” and to end, more briefly, “with trials.”

First off, let us note that the *desire* to do a good thing does not always carry with it confidence of *ability* to do that good thing. Self-doubts can weaken our resolve so that we can hardly accomplish that which we want to accomplish. A heart that is confident can rush ahead into the battle, but a heart that is heavy with doubt holds back. The arms become weaker, the legs become slower, the prospect of victory begins to dim.

This difference between the desire to do a good thing and confidence of being able to succeed was at the heart of Luther’s reform of what is called “the office of the keys.” It refers to Confession and Absolution. The pastoral heart of Luther was moved with sympathy for the plight of medieval Christians who knew that they needed to confess their sins and who wanted to do so, but who wondered whether they could actually accomplish that good deed. Piety in those days had developed the rule that not only must one go to Confession at least once a year, but that when one did go to Confession, it was necessary to confess *all* of one’s sins. But people of tender conscience were sometimes left worrying whether they might have forgotten some sin, and so they were left wondering whether their Absolution was valid. In the *Smalcald Articles* (1537) you can read Luther recount the various ways in which even people of good will were deprived of the consolations of the Gospel by worry whether they had forgotten some sin or whether they had felt sufficient contrition for their sins. So, Luther changed the rule and asked people to come to Confession, by all means, and to confess all the sins of which they were aware, but chiefly to confess the sin that was especially troubling them and then to take sure trust in the word of Absolution.

I suggest that there is a similar distinction concerning temptation. It is one thing to *desire* to defeat temptation. It is quite another thing to be confident that *you can do it*. St. Paul would have you be confident about that. He promises you that you will not be tempted overmuch. Let me read aloud the good words again, this time in the old King James Version:

There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted *above that ye are able*; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it. (1 Corinthians 10:13, KJV)

In this morning’s Gospel Lesson, it is hard to miss the sense of urgency in our Lord’s call to repentance. But what good is urgency, short of capacity? Jesus tells the parable of the unfruitful fig tree. It has grown for three years. It is high time for it to produce figs. The vinedresser has cared for it, tended it, watered it, protected it from thorns and thistles that would choke it of life. It has had a favored station in life, but has failed to produce fruit. The owner of the vineyard is out of patience.

He instructs that it should be cut down so that a better tree can be planted in its place. The vinedresser intercedes for that tree:

And he answered him, “Let it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. ⁹And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.” (Luke 13:8-9, RSV)

Good. Someone has stood up for the unfruitful fig tree. Yet notice that there is a limit to the time of mercy. The vinedresser does not plead, “Give it another thirty years, give it another seventy years.” No, give it one more year. The matter is urgent, then. Judgment day is coming.

The great heading for this season of Lent, now upon us, was struck in our Ash Wednesday reading from St. Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians:

¹Working together with [Christ], then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain. ²For he says, “At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation.” Behold, *now* is the acceptable time; behold, *now* is the day of salvation. (2 Corinthians 6:1-2, RSV)

A similar note is struck in this morning’s First Lesson, from Isaiah 55:

⁶Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; ⁷let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. (Isaiah 55:6-7, NRSV)

There can be no doubt, then, our Maker wants us to immediately turn to piety. He grants us a new day, morning by morning, that we will use that day to put the “old Adam,” the “old Eve” to death within us and rise up a new and righteous person to live before God.

But St. Paul’s teaching about help in time of temptation is crucial here, for what good is urgency apart from capacity? How does it help us to know that time’s a’wastin, and that there is urgent need for piety if we doubt whether we can do any such thing? St. Paul would have us know that we *can* do this good thing. We can resist temptation to sin. We can fight the good fight of faith and win.

If, for example, you have heard Fiona Apple’s song “Criminal,” you can perhaps detect in her a very real doubt as to whether she is *able* to keep on the straight and narrow path:

Heaven help me for the way I am
Save me from these evil deeds before I get them done
I know tomorrow brings the consequence at hand
But I keep living this day like the next will never come
Oh, help me...

My heart goes out to her. My heart goes out to each of us who is troubled by doubts as to whether we win against temptation.

That is why St. Paul's promise is so important. He would have us believe that we can triumph over temptation if we will. Amazing thought! In time of temptation, St. Paul would have us seek shelter in Christ. If we have been baptized, Jesus has both accepted us into his band of disciples and accepted responsibility to provide for us grace in the day of trouble. We should believe, then, that there is for us somewhere in life a door, a window, some way of escape from the temptations that beset us.

Let me use an example from this past Wednesday's sermon about Joseph in Egypt. Potiphar's wife desires Joseph. His master's wife desires to sleep with him:

And it came to pass after these things, that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph; and she said, Lie with me. (Genesis 39:7, KJV)

You and I know enough about the human heart, that we know ourselves vulnerable to sin, especially when we are fatigued or discouraged. We can permit ourselves to be persuaded by arguments that on a better day would not convince us. But on *this* day, this day when we are downhearted, the tempting voice is alluring. "Lie with me," she says. Again, she repeats her invitation, "Lie with me." And so, could we have blamed Joseph if he had yielded? Could we have blamed Joseph if he had reasoned thus with himself:

Nothing has gone well these past few years. I've been betrayed by my own brothers, deprived of father and mother, sold as a slave. Nothing has gone well recently, but *this* shall go well! In this cold world, I shall get me some warmth. In this harsh world, I shall at last take me some comfort!

But Joseph does not follow this line. He does not lower his guard, relax his virtue, abandon his principles.

Rather, he answers Potiphar's wife in the most excellent of ways. He answers that he does not mean to sin against either God or his neighbor:

⁹There is none greater in this house than I; neither hath he kept back any thing from me but thee, because thou art his wife: how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God? (Genesis 39:9, KJV)

It would have been a fine thing if Potiphar's wife had been moved by this little speech, for it was a noble speech indeed. It would have been a fine thing if she had shown mercy on the young man's struggle. But she showed no mercy. Rather, she persisted in her temptation, "Lie with me."

So, the young man runs away. Sometimes that is the "better part of valor." Run away! Get out of there! St. Paul promises that with the temptation, the Lord

will provide a way of escape. Joseph took that way of escape. He ran for the hills. He got out of there.

Sometimes we look at some sweet-hearted brother or sister in the Lord and imagine that they do not struggle against temptations, that they have lived threescore and ten years now and never known temptations such as we know. But we might be surprised! We know only half the story. We see the saint live and well before us now, standing firmly in faith. We might not have a clue what that person has seen and what victories that person has won over temptations that, if we knew them, would astonish and humble us.

No temptation has befallen us that has not been known by other Christians. And no temptation has befallen us that cannot be conquered, for at least one person in this world has conquered even the most terrible temptation haunting your soul. I mean Jesus. He has been sifted as you are. He has been tempted in every way such as you are, only without sin. He can sympathize with your struggle, and he can help you. He has taught us to pray, "lead us not into temptation." Well, let us put him to the test. Let us strike out in faith in him. Let us dare to imagine that we can conquer our temptations to sin.

Let me hasten on to the other translation, the other spiritual reality: trials. This too is important. No trial has befallen us that is not common to humanity, and God, who is faithful, will provide with the trial a way of escape, that we might bear it. No trial then must break our back. No storm of disappointment must entirely blow us away.

Picture some old oak tree standing out there in a meadow. The winds have buffeted it for ages now. Rain, snow, and icy winds have hurled themselves against it. From time to time, the tractor has gotten too close and grazed it. Children have climbed in its branches, even an occasional bear has hoisted its weight up there. That tree has suffered its trials, but the trials have done it no harm. Indeed, it is a stronger tree, with deeper roots than they many trees safe and sound in the midst of the forest protected by the surrounding trees.

Likewise for us. Trials do not necessarily weaken us. They might indeed make us stronger.

But as it was with temptation, so it is with trials: it is one thing to face a trial, but something else to believe that we can survive this trial and come through safe on yon side. St. Paul would have us believe that we can survive this trial.

It is not an easy thing to speak of the trials you might be facing. Think of my wife's congregation up there at The Wartburg, for example. They are elderly folk, most of them. They carry heavy burdens of declining strength as they get older. Their bodies often ache, their hearts too often ache in grief over the people they have lost and over their lost youth.

And while elderly folk grieve over lost youth, the youth themselves often face heavy trials. Sometimes I wonder whether their trials are not heavier than many of us knew when we were young. Young people today face the possibility of unemployment even though they might have worked hard all their lives. Indeed,

they face the possibility of poverty. All ages of people face the possibility of the public dole.

Furthermore, the ways of romance have become confusing and trying, such that some people end up alone.

Times of hospitalization or depression or sickness of a loved one or the press of poverty: such trials are awesome! To see someone bearing up under heavy trials is indeed a privilege. And none of us should assume that we will be spared such trials. It is with us as St. Paul said:

¹²Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. (1 Corinthians 10:12, KJV)

We live in a fallen world where things too often go wrong. We are not yet in heaven, and till we reach that good place, we are subject to trials here below.

As it was with temptations, so it is with trials: Our trials are not unique to us, but are common to humanity, and with the trial, God, who is faithful, will provide a way of escape, that we might bear it.

The utmost illustration of this saying is the passion of our Lord Jesus. I am thinking of that stretch of time from Gethsemane to his final breath on the cross. What a time of trial that was! In Gethsemane he was in agony of soul, till great drops of sweat fell from him like drops of blood. He seems to have been in terror. Let us hope that you and I never have to experience such fear. And he prayed that he could escape that which he dreaded. Does not St. Paul promise that with the trial, God will provide a “way of escape, that you might bear it”? Well, Jesus prayed that he might be spared the cup of suffering heading his way. He prayed to be spared. He prayed urgently, repeatedly, and somehow, through the prayers of that night, Jesus won the victory. He was not spared the cup, but he was spared defeat by that cup. When the soldiers come to take him away to that bloody cross, he is ready. He endures the Cross, never cursing humanity, never breaking ranks with us.

And what a song of triumph he was able to sing afterwards. On Easter morning, we gladly sing Psalm 118, as if identifying with Jesus who endured his trial, and reached victory:

¹³*I was pushed hard*, so that I was falling, but the LORD helped me.

¹⁴The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ: As I gaze out at you, I am mindful that some of you are “pushed hard” these days. Some of your trials I know. Some are known only to God. But to each of us I say that we have been given a promise -- the promise that God will be with us, will never forsake us, and will see us through safe to victory. Even greater than that, even greater than the promise given to us, is this: that *Christ* is given to us. He gives himself to us now in the Blessed Sacrament, pledging that his very body and blood are offered for us. He is the One

who makes good St. Paul's promise. He is the One who is going to supply grace enough to us that we will be able to keep our heads up and to walk with him all the way to heaven one day. If we try, we will find a way of escape that we might bear life's temptations and trials, through the grace and merit of Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.