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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7, Matthew 4:1-11
Backsliding

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

This is a sermon about backsliding—a sad topic. If you are a life-long Lutheran, you might not know about backsliding—or rather, you might know the *experience*, but not so much the *notion*. So, let's talk about the notion this morning, with the aim that we not fall so much into real thing.

My opening text is our Prayer of the Day. That prayer seems perfect to me as a meditation on this morning's Bible Lessons and then as a wise prayer for help based on those Lessons. Here is the appointed prayer for today:

Lord God, our strength, the battle of good and evil rages within and around us, and our ancient foe tempts us with his deceits and empty promises. Keep us steadfast in your Word and, when we fall, raise us again and restore us through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

Two things immediately catch my attention in this prayer. First is the idea about temptations “within” us:

...the battle of good and evil rages *within* and around us, and our ancient foe tempts us with his deceits and empty promises.

Many of us could say, Amen! to that. We could sigh and admit that our hearts are not yet pure—that even if we lived in a wonderful world with nothing to vex us, nothing to exhaust us, we'd probably end up messing things up anyway. None of us are all that far away from Adam and Eve. They had every advantage of strength and health and wisdom and daily conversation with God, and yet there was something about the construction of their hearts that left them vulnerable to sin. None of us are all that far away from following their pattern of fall. Dogs and cats seem not to fall into sin, but we do! The battle of good and evil surrounds us, yes, but it is also *within* us.

And the second note in the prayer is the acknowledgment that we often lose this battle — the battle of good and evil within us and around us. That's where the backsliding phrase comes into the prayer:

...and, *when we fall*, raise us again and restore us through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord...

It would be more cheerful if the prayer had been phrased in the conditional: "... *if we fall*." But no, the prayer is more realistic about our human race than that. The issue is not so much "if we fall," but rather, "when we fall." Then we need God's forgiveness and help to get back up on our feet and pick up again the path of holiness of life which we started, but fell from.

But there is a blessed exception to this rule about human falling into sin. I mean, Jesus. He did not backslide. He did not forsake the path of righteousness he had committed himself to. He did not yield to the temptations the devil hurled at him in the wilderness.

So, let's linger with Jesus and admire him in his desert contest with Satan.

HIS BAPTISM

Let's step back a moment from the desert temptations of Jesus to consider his baptism, just a few verses before today's text. Recall that John the Baptist preached what he called a baptism "with water unto repentance":

¹¹I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: (Matthew 3:11, KJV)

John was aware that his baptism was inferior to the baptism of the One who cometh after him, but such as it was, it was what he could do. He could invite people who were conscious of their sins and sorry for them and meant to do better and to get themselves ready for the Kingdom of God to be baptized with water. It seems to have been a kind of visual vow of confession and amendment of life.

Now, here is the strange thing: Among those who came to be baptized by John was our Savior Jesus. We believe that he had no need of John's baptism of repentance, for he had done no sin of which he could confess and repent. But let's set that thought aside for the moment and simply look at the pattern and contour of what Jesus was doing when he came to be baptized. He was doing what everyone else was doing. He was turning away from sin and dedicating himself to God henceforth. He had done well so far. Now he declares his intention to do well going forward. He was doing what you and I do when we are baptized or what the pietist does when he goes to the mourner's bench and gives his heart to the Lord: he is renouncing sin, death, and the devil, along with all the devil's false promises and false ways. And having turned from sin, he was turning toward his heavenly Father.

Now, many a man, many a woman has arisen from the waters of baptism or from the mourner's bench with sincere determination to do exactly what their

baptism signified: they intended to be true children of God henceforth. Perhaps you remember that good intention—maybe you had joy in your heart when you were baptized or when you affirmed your baptism or when you had given your private confession and received the word of forgiveness. You felt clean again and renewed and you meant to flee from sin henceforth.

The backsliders are the ones who fail. Who are they? Who are these ones who start down the good path, but then turn aside from it? Well, they are us! Right? We are the backsliders. What Isaiah said of old applies even to us who have been baptized:

⁶All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way... (Isaiah 53:6, RSV)

But Jesus did not backslide. He rose up from the waters of baptism and was driven into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. Understand that it is the business of the devil to tempt the repentant one as soon as possible. The devil wants no truly repentant people around. And he is not slack about his business. When we repent, soon miserable Satan comes along tempting us back toward sin.

So, that's what he did with Jesus. "Ahh," he says to himself, "Here's another penitent. I mean to get him! I mean to draw him back into my world." And so he sets right to the task, with cleverly designed temptations of our Lord Jesus. Food, fame, wealth and glory: they have pulled down many a good person. The devil figures they will pull down Jesus too.

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

What is at stake in the desert temptations of Jesus? Answer: Everything! You could think that a major war, or a brilliant scientific discovery, or a world nuclear disarmament conference would be the most important event in the world. I say, No, the most important event this world has ever know was this battle between Jesus and the devil. If Jesus survives this battle, all other things can be handled. But if he loses, we are all lost.

Remember that I said that the baptism of Jesus was strange in the sense that he had no sin of which to confess and repent. That was true. And yet, it was also true that Jesus had great need to be baptized and live a life of repentance henceforth. He had such need, not for his sake, but for ours. This world needed someone to stand up to the devil. This world needed someone to do what Adam and Eve had failed to do: to refuse the devil and to cling entirely to God. That is, this world needed a Savior – not simply one more sinner needing to be saved.

ALONE

In his desert temptation, Jesus was at a disadvantage—the same disadvantage that we would have faced if we had been there: Jesus was alone. Mother and father were not there, nor were his disciples. There was no one in sight who expected

Jesus to maintain high standards. There was no one there to help Jesus think things through. No one who could share with him what life had taught. No one to remind him of his baptism and of the good path he had commenced. Altogether, Jesus was bereft of what Luther called the “mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers and sisters.” (*The Smalcald Articles*, Part 4, “Concerning the Gospel.”) When we are tempted, it helps to run to the company of others, especially to our brothers and sisters in the Lord. Even if we should be reluctant to share the details of what tempts us, still it is good to be around others when we are troubled. But Jesus was alone there in the desert. There wasn’t another soul in sight to whom he could speak.

And yet, Jesus was not alone, for he was always mindful of his heavenly Father. In the midst of temptation, that is the help we need above all others: that we should remain true to our God who sees all, including our battles with temptation.

Again and again, Jesus answers the devil with the simple reminder of God. That is his method. He conquers Satan by referring to the Word of God. The devil might forget that Word or pretend that it does not exist, but Jesus will not do so. Let there be no one around to help Jesus, it does not matter. He knows the Word of the Lord. He cherishes it in his heart. And with that Word, he is able to rout the devil.

THE PINNACLE OF THE TEMPLE

Especially this time I am interested in the second temptation—the one where the devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and dares Jesus to cast himself down, to demonstrate that he is indeed the Son of God.

I have put a nineteenth-century drawing of our church and our steeple on the front cover of our worship folder to help us imagine the dizzying height of that temple pinnacle. Another great height is also on my mind: Our Roof Committee met with a roof contractor this past Wednesday and we stood right in this church nave and discussed the protection of our reredos and our Transfiguration painting here. The plan is that the contractor will have his men place immense ladders against the wall of our chancel and they will climb up there and attached heavy plastic drapes over the painting and the reredos to protect them. And I stood there thinking, I would fall down for sure! If I were at such a great height, no one would need to tempt me to cast myself down, because I would slip and fall for sure anyway!

But Jesus does not slip and fall. Nor does he cast himself down. This idea of casting himself down is surely a devilish temptation, because that is not the nature of Jesus. Jesus did not come to cast himself down but to lift up the lowly. He did not come to minister to himself, nor to follow devilish temptations, but he came to elevate others. It is as the Bible has testified of him from the beginning:

⁶For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly... (Psalm 138:6, RSV)

This divine interest in lifting up of the lowly is that of which Mary sang in her Magnificat:

He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. (Luke 1:52, KJV)

And in general, this is what Jesus wants to do for the whole human race: to lift us up from sin and degradation and to fit us for heaven.

So, Jesus resists each of the temptations of the devil. He conquers the evil one, who departs for a while to plan more assaults, which will culminate on the Cross. There, the devil will lose again.

FOLLOWING CHRIST'S PATTERN

Yesterday I mentioned to Carol that I planned to preach on backsliding today. She was interested in that. I said, "I'm a specialist!" To which she chuckled.

But the thing is, to our sorrow and to our shame, each of us is too much a specialist in this matter of backsliding. We do it, and do it again. But we do not have to. And certainly we are capable of doing it less than we do.

That's because Jesus was fully a man when he defeated the devil. He did that of which a human being is capable, but too often declines to do. He gave us a living example of something noble we too can do. As Saint James put it, we can resist the devil and he will flee from us:

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. (James 4:7, RSV)

More than this—more than his example—there is also this wonderful reality: This Jesus who knows a thing or two about defeating the devil is alive and ready to live in you, in me, if we will give him space. He will give us power to do a better job in this battle of good and evil that rages both around us and within us.

We are wise in our prayer to pray as Jesus taught us:

And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil.
(Matthew 6:13, RSV)

It seems that Jesus would not have us start the day in the morning or end the day at night without remembering this topic of temptation. Deliverance from it is possible, so pray for it and work for it, following the pattern of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.