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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
2/28/2016, The Third Sunday in Lent
1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:1-9
Temptation

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

I am going to read my opening text for you using the old King James Version. It is from our Epistle Lesson, 1 Corinthians 10. Modern versions of this text speak of our being “tested.” The older translation speak of our being “tempted.” I do not doubt that the modern translation is fine, but still, the older translation feels like it goes more to the heart of the matter. I mean, we are “tested” a lot in this world, beginning in elementary school and going through all of our education and maybe our vocations too. Nothing wrong or dramatic in being “tested.” But being “tempted” — well, that is a different matter. “Tempted” is a word that speaks of our souls and of our integrity and of eternity. It just feels like the old word “tempted” is the thing we ought to be talking about during Lent. In any case, here is this morning’s sermon text, using the old King James translation. St. Paul writes this:

¹³There 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 the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970), there is an interesting passage called “Peter’s Denial.” It is a brief exchange between Peter and Mary Magdalene. Peter has just denied knowing Jesus for the third time. He shouts to the old man by the fire in the high priest’s courtyard, “I don’t know him.”
“I don’t know him!”

Then the music changes and becomes more contemplative. It is as if Mary Magdalene and Peter are standing back and trying to make sense of Peter’s threefold denial of his Lord. Mary says to Peter:

Peter, don’t you know what you have said.
You’ve gone and cut him dead.

And Peter answers:

I had to do it, don’t you see?
Or else they’d go for me.

Well, yes, Peter, you might be right. They might “go for you.” But that does not mean that you should have denied your Lord.

Jesus had faced a similar temptation in the Garden of Gethsemane. He had trembled before the possibility that they might “go for him.” The Bible does not want us to miss the point that this was a true temptation for Jesus — an agony of soul. St. Luke speaks of “drops of blood”:

And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground. (Luke 22:44, KJV)

These great “drops of blood” will be the real thing, soon enough. Already the soldiers and guards are assembling. They are bringing their “lanterns and torches and weapons” (John 18:3). Soon, Jesus will be arrested.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus knew that his end was at hand. He knew it, he feared it, and he prayed most earnestly to be spared this cup of suffering. So, he did these things: he agonized, he sweat great drops of blood, and he prayed. But the one thing he did not do was to yield to temptation. He ended his prayer with his great words of submission: “. . .not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42, KJV). And with these words of submission, he surrendered his life to his heavenly Father for the sake of the world, for the sake of you and me.

What if Jesus had taken the rationale of Peter? What if Jesus had fled the Garden of Gethsemane before the guards and their torches and weapons had even arrived? What if Jesus had said,

I had to do it, don't you see?
Or else they'd go for me.

Well, if Jesus had taken such a line, then you and I would have been lost. Such are the risks of cutting and running. You place yourself and others at jeopardy.

Here at Immanuel, we often receive new members by way of a simple liturgy called “Affirmation of Baptism.” It is a chance for the new member to stand up and publicly say that he belongs to Christ, she belongs to Christ, and means to continue that way.

I always use the dramatic language of that liturgy, knowing full well that I am asking our new member to make an extraordinary commitment:

☐ *[Name]*, do you intend to continue steadfast in the confession of the Church, and *suffer all* rather than fall away from it?

☑ *I do so intend, with the help of God.*

☐ Do you intend ... to walk as becomes the Gospel of Christ, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to the Triune God, *even unto death?*

☒ *I do so intend, by the grace of God.*

We might think that such strong promises go beyond human doing, yet I cannot bring myself to leave them out. I believe that Christians should make such promises, should recommit themselves to such promises, and should go ahead and fulfill such promises, because people are at stake. Our loved ones, our fellow citizens, and our own souls are at stake. Peter had promised such things:

²⁹Peter said to him, “Even though they all fall away, I will not.” ³⁰And Jesus said to him, “Truly, I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.” ³¹But he said vehemently, “If I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And they all said the same. (Mark 14:29-31, RSV)

The disciples, then, swore loyalty to Jesus. It would have been better if they had fulfilled their promises. Then Jesus would not have died in such loneliness, abandoned even by his chief friends.

Our topic is temptation. The theme so far is that we ought not to yield to temptation. When the heat is on, we ought not to cut and run.

Now, let us shift to the words of encouragement we can find in this morning’s Epistle Lesson. Listen again to the first line of our text:

¹³There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man... (1 Corinthians 10:13, KJV)

Common to humanity: Let us contemplate this apostolic claim, and in contemplating it, be encouraged: There is no temptation that has come upon us that is not common to humanity. No matter what the swirl of impulses and temptations that might inhabit our souls, none of them is unique to us, none of them is the special weapon of Satan fashioned just for us. The temptations we suffer are known to others. Some of those others might have fallen before our temptations. But some of those others might have endured and triumphed over the temptation. We seldom know such struggles. They are often the quiet, private battles of individuals. That one who looks so peaceful might in fact be in the midst of some terrible struggle, dealing with some fierce temptation. Indeed, that one might be dealing with the same temptation that you are tempted with, that I am tempted with. Satan seems not to waste his arrows on just one person. When he forges a weapon in his devilish armory, he launches that weapon against various people — perhaps more people than we would ever guess. No temptation has

overtaken you that is not common to humanity, says the apostle. Let us, then, not suppose that we are fighting a lonely battle, one nobody else has had to endure, one nobody else has ever weathered and triumphed in.

And there is good reason to think that other people *have* weathered and triumphed in the very temptation that besets us. That's because victory over temptation does not go beyond human doing. Listen again to the apostle as he speaks of this:

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)

There is always some door available to us — some door, some window, some way of escape, that we might be able to endure the temptations that trouble us so. We need only plunge ahead, blindly if need be — plunge ahead into obedience. We will find grace sufficient for the day.

Temptations, you know, come in various forms. There is the temptation of desire. David sits on the roof of his palace in the springtime of the year. In the time when kings go forth to wage war, David stays at home, lounges up there on his roof, and spies Bathsheba taking a bath. He desires her, and he lets his desire overwhelm him. Thereby he ruins everything, commits adultery, plans and executes murder, and lives out his days as a reduced old man.

But there are other temptations. There is the temptation of Peter in the courtyard – the temptation of fear:

I had to do it, don't you see?
Or else they'd go for me.

There are temptations to wrath and revenge. And thus the LORD appeals to Cain, to stop his brooding and to stop his plans to hurt his brother Abel:

⁶The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? ⁷If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.” (Genesis 4:6, NRSV)

What the LORD says to Cain so long ago, he says to us too:

...sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.

And the glorious thing is this: We *must* master it because we *can* master it. For you are that most magnificent of God's creatures: you are a human being — but little lower than the angels, crowned by our Maker with glory and honor:

For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. (Psalm 8:5, KJV)

We are the kind of creature to whom our Maker says, With the temptation I will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. Sharks and lions and stars zooming through the galaxy are not given such freedom. But you are. I am. We are the kind of creature that our Maker loves so much that the Second Person of the Trinity was willing to suffer his own temptations for our sake. Jesus loves us so much that he was willing to die for us so that if we should die as we try to remain true to him, well, such a death is no death at all, but simply a journey home to Him who knows a thing or two about temptation, who has endured and triumphed over it himself for our sake, and to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.