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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/5/2017, The First Sunday in Lent
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7, Matthew 4:1-11

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

This morning's Bible Lessons are about temptation. Adam and Eve failed in face of temptation, with grave consequences for humanity ever since, and Jesus triumphed in face of temptation, with hope for humanity ever since. Let's see what we can learn for our own good fight of faith.

To begin, let me lift up this morning's Prayer of the Day. I love this prayer. I think of it as a keynote prayer for the whole season of Lent now stretching before us. It is a prayer that speaks of "the battle of good and evil," and it goes this way:

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**

My theme for this sermon is that we are indeed locked in a battle of good and evil, but that the battle is not hopeless. Likewise, it is true that "our ancient foe tempts us," and yet we need not always fall before his temptations. Jesus did not fall. If we can triumph over *even one* temptation in his name, this world is going to be better off, and we might well spare someone from the suffering that our fall would have laid upon that one.

Since this is the 500th anniversary of our Lutheran tradition, let me speak of Martin Luther and his battles against the devil. We might be tempted to say that, of course, *Jesus* triumphed over the devil there in the wilderness. Jesus triumphed because he is God. And that is true, except that it tends to sell short that Jesus is also fully man. We will return to that point latter. For now, let us begin by speaking of Martin Luther and his battles against the devil. There is no denying that Martin Luther was a man – a quite fallible man – and yet Luther waged a strong and optimistic battle against the evil that "rages within and around us."

My wife, Carol, has actually seen the spot where Luther hurled his ink well against the devil. You cannot see the ink stain anymore because over the centuries, pilgrims to the Wartburg in Eisenach, Germany have so much scrapped away at the ink that it is gone. All that remains is the repaired

plaster. But that repaired plaster marks where Satan was bonked on the nose, unless he ducked.

If you read enough Luther, you will discover that for him, the devil was no mere myth, but a stark reality to be dealt with. For Luther, the devil is no mere idea, but a fierce enemy roaming the earth, searching for souls to devour.

So, in Luther's *Table Talk*, we read about a pastor who came to Luther to complain about poltergeists and disturbances caused by Satan. The man said that the devil disturbed the nighttime by hurling pots and pans and smashing utensils in the house. This had been going on for a year, the pastor said, so that his wife and children were at their wits end and wanted to leave the house.

The fascinating thing about Luther's answer is that he does not doubt the truth of the story for a moment. He doesn't probe the man, asking him, "Are you sure?" Instead, Luther launches into his pastoral advice for the man.

Luther responded, "Dear Brother, be strong in the Lord and firm in your faith! Don't give in to that robber! Suffer the outward things and the minor damage that comes from the breaking of pots, for it can't harm you in body and soul, as you have found, for the angel of the Lord is with you. Let Satan play with the pots. Meanwhile pray to God with your wife and children [and say], 'Be off, Satan! I'm lord in this house, not you. By divine authority I'm head of this household, and I have a call from heaven to be pastor of this church. I have testimony from heaven and earth, and this is what I rely on. You enter this house as a thief and robber. You are a murderer and a scoundrel. Why don't you stay in heaven? Who invited you to come here?' In this way you should sing him his litany and his legend and let him play as long as he pleases."¹

Then Luther talks a bit about his time at the Wartburg, when he was young and threw his ink pot at the devil. Luther does not speak of his ink pot, but does he speak of his confidence in wrestling with the devil:

I was often pestered [by the devil] when I was imprisoned in my Patmos, high up in the fortress in the kingdom of the birds. I resisted him in faith and confronted him with

¹Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 54: Table Talk*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 54, pp. 279–280). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

this verse: God, who created man, is mine, and all things are under his feet. If you have any power over him, try it!

Now we are getting to the heart of the matter. Luther is confident in his conflict with the devil because Luther trusts in Jesus:

God, who created man, is mine, and all things are under his feet. If you have any power over him, try it!

Luther believes that he belongs to Christ, who is his fortress and refuge. Jesus is a much bigger deal for Luther than Satan is. Luther means to live for Jesus, not for Satan. And Luther means to put his trust in Jesus as Saviour, rather than any of the discouraging things Satan might whisper to him.

Discouraging thoughts. The Gospel is well able to console us against discouraging thoughts. They come our way. I bet discouraging thoughts come to each of us from time to time. They often take this form — the form of self-doubt:

I am insufficient. I am not young enough, I am not pretty enough, I am not wealthy enough, I am not noticed enough. I am not good enough. I guess I had better take some shortcuts.

For Luther, the particular self-doubts he had seem to have been whether he was worthy of his Reformation work, and whether he was worthy of heaven. He was mindful of his sins and failures. But he fought back against the devil and the devil's discouraging thoughts. For example, Luther wrote this:

When the devil comes during the night to plague me, I give him this answer: Devil, I must sleep now; for this is God's command: Work during the day, sleep at night. If he does not stop vexing me but faces me with my sins, I reply: Dear devil, I have heard the record. But I have committed still more sins which do not even stand in your record. Put them down, too...²

It is not that Luther does not care about the multitude of his sins. He does care and grieves over them. But even more, he puts his trust in Jesus and lays claim to his Saviour. And so we can read this wonderful little story about Luther:

² *What Luther Says*, No. 1191 "How Luther Handled the Devil."

The devil sought to discourage [Luther], by making him feel guilty, through rehearsing a list of his sins. When the devil had finished, Luther purportedly said, “Think harder: you must have forgotten some.” And the devil did think, and he listed more sins. When he was done enumerating the sins, Luther said, “Now, with a red pen write over that list, “The blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, cleanses us from all sin.” The devil had nothing to say.³

In this manner, Luther fought back against the devil and the devil’s temptations toward despair and toward wrongdoing.

The Letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus too was immersed in the battle of good and evil:

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, RSV)

Jesus was tempted as we are, yet did not yield. How could he yield? That was not the direction of his heart, for his heart always inclined toward love.

Here is a key thought for us: The problem with giving way to temptation is that it always amount to a failure of love. Jesus did not yield to temptation because there were lives at stake. Indeed, the salvation of the whole world was at stake. But if it had been just your life at stake — name yourself, for I mean you — if it had been just your life at stake, or mine, Jesus would not have yielded to the devil in the desert. You are that precious to him.

Temptation is always the call to give up on love, to close your eyes to the people being hurt, to rationalize and to say, “Well, it is only a little hurt, a little failure. I will do better next time.”

What Lent wants of us is for us to picture the people of this world and to resolve to help them, not hurt them. There are lives to be protected, lives to be cherished. There are parents to be honored, children to be treasured, marriages to be sheltered, property to be protected, reputations to be preserved. There is humanity waiting for our love. The devil does not want *any* of this! The devil does not want any flourishing of humanity, but the devil can be resisted. It is as the apostle says:

³ [http://www.redeemer-lutheran.net/Articles/1000039345/Redeemer Lutheran Church/Media Center/Pastors Articles/Throwing Ink at.aspx](http://www.redeemer-lutheran.net/Articles/1000039345/Redeemer_Lutheran_Church/Media_Center/Pastors_Articles/Throwing_Ink_at.aspx)

Resist the devil and he will flee from you. (James 4:7, RSV)

He will flee and leave this world in some peace. If we resist even one temptation this coming week, it is a victory for love and it is a victory we can claim in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.