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

13And [Jesus] was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan...[Mark 1:13, RSV]

This is one of those passages in the Bible that reminds us that the Christian life is not always easy to the one trying to live such a life. If the devil dared to tempt Jesus, we can expect that he is going to tempt you and me too and make our Christian life hard. We might imagine that for such-and-such a saintly person, a good life is pretty effortless. I doubt that it is effortless. Think of the most saintly person you have known in your life. Perhaps your mother or father. I could think of my mother and father, but also I am glad to think of saintly people I have known here at Immanuel. Over the course of a long ministry, I have been blessed to know many holy souls. Let me mention one as an illustration. It always seemed to me that Kathryn Weidmann, of blessed memory, was a natural-born saint. It did my heart good just to be around her, because the very spirit of Christ seemed strong and steady in her. But, really, who can know how easy it is for any of us to walk with Jesus? If we could somehow inhabit the life of other Christians, we might discover that their faith and integrity is hard won. They exercise steady discipline to stay as faithful as they are, and then, in spite of that discipline, they might fall in ways that only they themselves detect and understand. Then they pray for forgiveness, pick themselves up again, and renew the battle to be true to Jesus. If we could peek into the heart of one another, we might be surprised by the temptations to bitterness, impatience, greed, power, lust, or despair we find there. We might keep it together, but that is not saying that life is easy for any of us. If Jesus was not spared fierce temptation, then we are not likely to be spared it either.

My plan in this sermon is to lift up some passages in the Bible and in the liturgy that acknowledge that to be a Christian is sometimes hard. It is like being thrown into a raging sea, trying to keep our heads above water and to maintain our loyalty to Christ. It is to be immersed in conflict, in a great battle between Jesus and the devil over our souls. It is to be tossed around by contrary spiritual forces around us and within us.

We are now entering the season of Lent. This is supposed to be a time of repentance and amendment of life for us. I hope that these passages to which we now turn will comfort and encourage us in the penitential life, even when such a life is hard going.
I am thinking of three cases. First, let us consider St. Paul. We call him a saint, and surely he was. But we know through his own testimony that he often was disappointed with himself. It is good for us to remember this in case we ourselves, for time to time, should be disappointed with ourselves. Paul’s ultimate cry of victory in Christ is our cry too. Second, I would like to lift up a couple liturgical texts – texts that ring true for many of us. I find it comforting to think that our regular liturgy knows that it can be hard to be a good Christian. And finally, I want to take a look at this morning’s brief Gospel Lesson – St. Mark’s telling of the wilderness temptations of our Lord.

So, we begin with St. Paul. He has a sense of wonder at his own failures:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. (Romans 7:15, RSV)

He is puzzled and dismayed by his ability to go ahead and do the very thing he disapproves. Furthermore, he confesses that he fails to the good he approves:

For the good that I would, I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. (Romans 7:19, KJV)

We are not speaking of a pirate here. We are not speaking of a terrorist or a kidnapper. We are speaking of an apostle, of a saint! We are speaking of a man who won the admiration and affection of many people. We are speaking of the chief theologian of the early church. He is a good man to many an eye, but to his own eye, he is a perplexity.

He speaks of a battle within himself. Paul is a consecrated man. He is a real Christian, dedicated heart and soul to Jesus. He has been baptized. He received the Holy Spirit and has obeyed that Spirit, letting it sweep him along throughout the Mediterranean world, preaching Jesus Christ. He has performed wonders, he has written Spirit-filled epistles, he has wisely counseled congregations and individual Christians, he has won many souls to Christ. He has a good heart.

And yet within that heart, he sees another principle at work:

I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. Romans 7:21, KJV

What a strange simultaneity he notes in himself: “when I would do good, evil is present with me.” Good and evil both reside in his heart, and this side of heaven, they always will. Temptations are not reserved for the young. All of our lives, we will find this strange mixture within us – both good and evil, until at last the evil will be entirely banished from us in heaven.
Till then, to be a Christian is to endure a hybrid existence. We have Christ's Spirit within us, urging us on toward a good and holy life. But we also have the spirit of the world within us, and we have walked with that spirit longer than we have walked with Christ!\footnote{An important point made by Charles Spurgeon in his sermon "The Fainting Warrior" (1859).} Think of a sixty-year old fellow who has given his heart to Jesus, been baptized, has begun to live in Christ, and now has good and holy impulses. He might well prove a saint of the church, even a martyr for Christ. Yet, till his dying day, he will also carry within him the momentum of his earlier sixty years. I wish Baptism would entirely cast out those old ways, but judging by St. Paul, that does not seem to be the case.

It is important to acknowledge this, lest we be surprised and undone by the fact that we are Christians and yet still tempted by sin. The challenge of the Christian life is not to be entirely pure, for that does not seem possible for us this side of heaven. The trick is not to be entirely pure and innocent, but rather to practice purity and innocence so that the Spirit of Christ grows stronger in us and the spirit of the devil grows weaker. Like St. Paul, we might never entirely overcome and cast out the evil in us, and yet we might so obey the good in us that we actually become better people with the passing of the years. We might and should actually become a credit to Christ and his church and help to the world.

So, those have been a few words about St. Paul and the strange mixture of good and bad he finds in himself.

Now let's turn to a couple liturgical texts. The first is one we speak just about every Sunday. It goes this way:

...we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. (Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness, LBW)

A dear member of our congregation once told me that that is her favorite line in the whole liturgy – this confession that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. It is the one piece of doctrine that seems to be proved by personal experience. It happens to be bad theology. Theologian Gilbert Meilaender rightly complains about this notion of being in “bondage to sin.” He points out that such a confession is in flat contradiction to St. Paul who rejoices in our liberty in Christ, as in Romans 6:

But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life. (Romans 6:22, RSV)
And so, if we have been “set free from sin,” then we are not “in bondage to sin.” The problem with saying that we in bondage to sin is that it tempts us to give up the fight. We say to ourselves, “Why struggle with this temptation so much. I am bound to fail anyway.” Not so! St. Paul says. We are free of any sinful bondage and we should enjoy our freedom in Christ.

So I understand all that. Still, our weekly confession that we are in bondage to sin rings true for us. It acknowledges that we are not yet in heaven. Jesus has not yet cast out every sinful impulse from our hearts. And so it is that our liturgy acknowledges that the Christian life is often hard for us.

The other piece of liturgy I would like to lift up occurs in today’s Prayer of the Day. It is the prayer for this, the First Sunday in Lent:

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.

Isn’t it the truth! The battle of good and evil does indeed rage within and around us, and our ancient foe tempts us. The fact that it rages “within us” is something St. Paul has been talking about – the way there are two principles residing in our souls, one drawing us to the good, the other to the bad. But this prayer lifts up another important spiritual point: the battle of good and evil also rages “around us.” That is why we should hasten to the Bible and to the Church as often as we can. We live in a tough world. We live in a world that tempts us, vexes us, disappoints us, exhausts us, and would lead us off in various wrong ways. It is bad enough to have the battle of good and evil within us, but the evil within us is sometimes inflamed by the evil around us. So, hasten to the Bible and the Church and try to find some rest for your souls there.

Finally, let me speak of this morning’s Gospel Lesson. St. Mark’s reference to the wilderness temptation of our Lord is simple and stark compared to the versions in St. Matthew and St. Luke. In Matthew and Luke, we read of our Lord’s temptation to turn a stone into bread, to thrown himself off the pinnacle of the temple, and to bow down and worship the devil. They are beguiling temptations, and we can be grateful and inspired by the victory of Jesus over them. But somehow I find St. Mark’s simple description of the wilderness temptations to be even more troubling. Mark gives us no details about the temptations – just that Jesus was tempted by Satan for forty days. But the mind can stagger at that long stretch of temptation. The devil is a
roaring lion, the Bible says, seeking souls to devour (1 Peter 5:8). If ever the devil wanted to devour a soul, I bet he wanted to devour Jesus. This was his chance to vanquish Jesus before our Savior’s ministry had even begun. You and I might have had a time of spiritual crisis in our life, but pity the poor person who must struggle with waves of temptation for forty days. Jesus had to stand steady under assaults of the devil, and those assaults might have been powerful and relentless. A person might triumph over the sin of wrath, for example, for a moment or two, but if the devil is really focused, he will replace the temptation to wrath with the temptation to self-pride that we were able to calm our anger for a while. If we wrestle that temptation to self-pride to the ground, the temptation toward complacency might come along, and we resolve to no longer speak of God and of his ways. Then temptations toward over-eating or over-drinking or lust come along. And perhaps the worst of temptations seeks a home in our soul—temptations toward despair or toward the notion that nothing really matters. If Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for forty days, that seems like a pretty hard stretch of time to me.

A fascinating thing about the temptations of Jesus is that the very Spirit of God led him out into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all agree in this: it was the Holy Spirit who led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. In fact, St. Mark uses the forceful word “drove.” After the baptism of Jesus, the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness:

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\text{The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.} \\
\text{(Mark 1:12, RSV)}
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That is what cowboys do: they drive the cattle before them. It is as if the Spirit is using the devil for the Spirit’s own holy purposes! Let me make a suggestion about this—about why the very Spirit of God could desire that Jesus and you and me should wrestle with temptation. It is the phenomenon of the windswept trees. They are the strong trees. Think of some tree in the middle of the forest. It is a strong tree no doubt, but its strength is almost nothing compared to some old oak tree standing alone in the meadow, buffeted by the snow and the winds, without the shelter of the forest. My wife, Carol, loves the image of the alpine trees clinging to the mountain, with their branches all sweeping off to the side because the mountaintop winds are forcing them in that direction. Those alpine trees might be short, but they are mighty. In a harsh environment, they can survive!

So it is with us and our temptations: It might well be the purpose of the Holy Spirit that we wrestle with the winds of temptation, so that we can survive in a tough world. Our long experience with temptation might be the crucial thing—that we not be undone by some temptation heading our way. Our long experience with temptation might save us from the primrose path that leads to destruction of our responsibilities and our reputations.
Well, these are pious speculations about the purpose of the Holy Spirit in permitting us to be buffeted by temptations: He wants us to grow stronger for the battle before us. Whether or not this is so, at least we can end with this good doctrine: St. Paul's cry of ultimate triumph belongs also to you and to me. That magnificent Chapter Seven of Romans ends with a sudden turn to Christ. After all his anguished words about failing to do the good he would do, and doing the evil he hates, St. Paul suddenly turns to Jesus, as if entrusting it all to him:

24 O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?

25 I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 7:24-25, KJV)

Let it be so with us too. Let us wrestle with sin this Lent and always. Let us wrestle with sin, bear our joy over our victories and our anguish over our defeats, and in the end, through it all, give thanks to God through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.