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

This is a sermon about trials and temptations — about hard seasons of life and about temptations even when the times are otherwise pretty good. I have prepared this morning’s sermon with the hope of encouraging us in our daily walk with Christ, in the heat of battle, in the throes of temptation and trials. I am thinking of our Epistle Lesson for today, from 1 Corinthians Chapter 10. Especially I am thinking of the last verse of the reading. St. Paul is writing. I am going to read it for you using the King James Version because that is the version of this important text some of us know almost by heart. It goes this way:

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)

That word there - “temptation” - could also be translated as “trial” or “testing.” Think of Thomas Paine’s great line, “These are the times that try men’s souls.” There are times in life that try our faith. Temptations to sin do that, but so do some rough stretches in life. Not all hard season of life try our faith. Sometimes our faith remains strong through the bad times. But there are some times that rock us. There are some seasons of life that bang away against our faith in Jesus.

So, these are the things I want to discuss in this morning’s sermon. When I speak of the times that test us, I mean both hot temptations to sin and hard times in life that threaten our faith in Jesus.

But before turning to our Epistle Lesson, I want to say a few words about this morning’s Gospel Lesson. It has a different tone from our sermon text, but it also can help keep us on the straight and narrow path. It teaches us that this business of temptation is a serious matter. We ought not to yield to

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1 πειρασμός (pi-ras-mos')
2 https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/175410-these-are-the-times-that-try-men-s-souls-the-summer
3 Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. (Matthew 7:14, KJV)
temptation, and if we do, we should repent. We should not put it off, but rather we should straightway repent.

This reading from Luke 13 is rather unrelenting. Jesus keeps moving the focus back on us, when perhaps we would prefer for the Lord to look elsewhere. There are three topics in a row — one, two, three: The murder of the Galileans by the Roman governor Pilate, the construction accident causing the death of eighteen people, and the parable of the unproductive fig tree. Each time, Jesus aims right at you and me, that we should repent.

Take that outrage by Pilate, for example:

There were some present at that very time who told him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. (Luke 13:1, RSV)

Notice that Jesus does not explain the outrage. He does not even condemn Pilate. Instead, he zeros in on us:

2And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus? 3I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. (Luke 13:2-3, RSV)

One commentator on this Gospel Lesson ends the exposition with these words:

The one who has heard this text as a message only to other people has not yet heard it.4

And this scholar is right. We like to think that Jesus is meek and mild, but we find him in this morning’s Gospel to be quite stern about this matter of repentance. He speaks of perishing:

3I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.

Recall that at the start of his ministry, Jesus was tempted out there in the desert. Now, this morning’s Gospel Lesson teaches us that Jesus wants us to follow his example of victory over temptation, and if we should fall, we should turn to repentance.

Our Lord’s call to repentance helps us in our daily life, in the heat of battle, in the throes of temptation. Jesus calls for repentance. He calls for it in a most earnest manner. He addresses our hearts. He wants us to resist temptation and if we fall, then we are to repent, lest we be like that fig tree. Things are not looking good for that fig tree. If it does not soon become productive, it is going to be cut down. I do not want that for us. I do not want us to be cut down. So, do you see what I mean? This matter of temptation is a serious business.

I put things together this way: Our Gospel Lesson warns us: Repent! And our Epistle Lesson comforts us by teaching us that we can ward off the devil if we would try. Then we will have less to repent of.

Now, we can return to our main text this morning. It is the more fun part of this sermon. Our Epistle Lesson is about victory over temptation. It teaches us that we can prevail if we will. It teaches us that we can hang in there, no matter how hot the temptations and how heavy the trials, and we can triumph. As St. James says:

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

Imagine that: that the devil should flee from us, turn tail and run away from us. What a sight! Resist him, the apostle says, and he will flee from us. I guess the devil just hates to be in the vicinity of someone who resists him. So, let us resist him!

There are three points I would like to lift up in this discussion of our Epistle Lesson. First, we join the rest of humanity in being tempted and tried. To be a person is to be tempted, at least until we get to heaven. Second, God will not let us be tempted “beyond our strength.” This is a dramatic claim. I can hardly make sense of it apart from Jesus. And finally, “with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.” If this be so, then we had best look for that way out, that way of escape. All three of these points are so powerful and are stated in such general terms that I believe they go beyond the local circumstances of the early Christians in Corinth. The church has long cherished these words of St. Paul, as if they apply not only to the ancient Corinthians, but also to you and me. Let’s take these three points in order.

First, temptation is common to humanity. When St. Paul says that no temptation or trial has overtaken you that is not common to humanity, the Holy Spirit means for us to apply this to ourselves, and in applying it, to be encouraged.

It is quite a thought. No temptation has come upon you that is not shared by others. You look at your neighbor, and you might think he or she has a good heart and Christian spirit, that she is a natural-born saint, and that he knows a kind of spiritual peace that you will never know. And yet, if we could
stand in that other person’s shoes, we might be astonished. We might be
appalled at the temptations and the burdens that that person daily puts up
with. And triumphs over! And going the other way around, we might think
that we ourselves are especially beset by temptation. We might want no one
else in the whole world to know the stirrings in our heart — the things we
would love to do if only Christ did not forbid them. But the apostle says that
temptations are “common to humanity.” And so it might well be that you
peaceful Christian is struggling with the same temptations you are. And
triumphing! If the time and circumstances seem right, we might learn more of
the spiritual warfare in which our brothers and sisters in Christ are engaged.
And maybe we can give some encouragement to one another. But at least,
there is this: If we struggle with some particular temptation or burden, there
are probably other Christians who are struggling likewise, and they are
having success. We can too.

Second point: God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your
strength. For one thing, this means that God is aware of our life of temptation
and testing. We are not alone when we are tempted, for God Almighty knows
what we are going through. He knows. He knows whether we triumph or
whether we fall. One way of the other, he knows what we go through and he is
faithful. He is faithful in the particular way that he will not let us be tempted
beyond our personal strength. He knows our strength and he knows our
weakness. He would not let Satan press Job too hard, but stayed the devil’s
hand. Likewise, he will not let you be pressed too hard. It might be that you
are stronger than you think. Do not give up too early.

There is a more glorious and mysterious point to be made about God’s
knowledge of our temptations. Not only does God know about temptation, but
he himself has felt it! That is a main point in the story of the desert
temptations of Jesus. Temptation cannot be foreign to God because Jesus has
felt temptation. St. Paul’s letter to the Hebrews especially lifts up this point.
Your temptations, however frustrated or even ashamed you are of them, are
not unknown to Jesus. And so we read in Hebrews 4:

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)

This means that when our text says that our God will not suffer us to be tested
“beyond our strength,” we should believe that God knows something about
human strength and weakness. He knows about it personally. And so we read
these great words in Hebrews:

For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to
help those who are tempted. (Hebrews 2:8, RSV)
For the Christian, the temptation within all temptations is the inclination to walk away from Christ. That would make things easier. At least, it would make dealing with this temptation easier. Just walk away from Jesus and yield to the temptation. Thus, the devil would have us reverse the saying about fleeing. Instead of us resisting the devil so that he flees from us, he would try to convince us to flee from Jesus, pretending that then everything will be okay. But what does the Bible say about the devil? He is this world’s great deceiver. Jesus calls the devil a murderer and a liar:

He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (John 8:44, RSV)

Our text says that God will not permit us to be tempted beyond our strength. But then, our strength is pretty small apart from Jesus. It would be better when we are tempted to think more and more of Jesus and to try to live more deeply in him. Pray the prayer he taught us, including his petition about temptation:

And lead us not into temptation...

Thus Jesus invites us to pray for some peace. He invites us to be spared temptation. Pray to him with confidence about this, and always try to walk in his Spirit.

Finally, our text speaks of “a way of escape.” That would be great! St. Paul says about Jesus that he ...

... 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, NRSV)

This is the way for which we must seek. When we are tempted or heavily burdened, we should not huddle too much to ourselves, but rather look for some way forward.

Somewhere, there has got to be a way of escape. We have the promise that our God can arrange reality so that we can make it:

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God... (Romans 8:28, KJV)
So, let us look for our way of escape. Let us get our feet moving. Let us not huddle down alone, permitting ourselves to be preoccupied with our temptation or our hard times in life. Many Christians could testify that it helped them to seek the company of the church and other brothers and sisters in Christ. Get moving, looking for that way of escape.

So, this has been a Lenten sermon. This is the season of the Church year when we try to walk more closely with Jesus. But, of course, Lenten sermons are not meant for just Lent, but for all of life. It will always be good for us to resist the devil, to resist his temptations, and to maintain our faith in Jesus even when the times are tough. Jesus triumphed over his temptations and trials, and lives to help us with ours. Let us triumph too, in his name, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.