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Lent 1
February 18, 2018
Matthew 4:1-11
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

Temptations are a reality. They're an inescapable ingredient in every human life. Just as Adam and Eve were enticed to sin—and that's what temptation is, an enticement to sin—so all people are tempted. From where do these temptations come? Certainly, they don't come from God: "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and He Himself tempts no one" (Jas 1:13). No, it is the enemies of God and His will—the devil, the world, and our own sinful nature—that tempt us. Moreover, temptation can't be avoided. As Jesus Himself says, "It is necessary that temptations come" (Mt 18:7).

Temptations come from outside us. The devil is called the Tempter for his first temptation of our first parents and for his work against us. And what do his temptations look like? If we understand his game, we'll be better able to overcome him when he inevitably does attack us.

The Tempter's strategy is always to create doubt in God. Doubt and faith are opposites. Anyone, whether a political or religious leader, who says doubt and faith go together, is double-tongued, just as the devil is double-tongued. And doubt is what the Tempter seeks to birth and nurse within our hearts. He seeks to make us uncertain about God, that God is seeking our best. He beguiles us into imagining that we would be happier if we took our destiny into our own hands. "Did God really say? You will not surely die." "God doesn't want you to eat of the fruit because then you will be like Him, knowing good and evil. So, just eat it, and you will be your own gods." "God is trying to keep you from fulfilling your truest potential, your fullest capacity." It's amazing when you listen to these New Atheists (and the Marxist Communists from a few decades ago), but they always say that religion and belief in God is getting in the way of progress. It's the same strategy the Tempter used with God's own Son when he tried to lure Him to use His power for His own purposes.

Moreover, one of the Tempter's allies is the world, which offends us in word and deed. The chief temptation of the world is to drive us to anger. The world has even convinced

many of us that it's okay to be angry as long as it's so-called "righteous anger." Yet, because of our sinful nature, our anger can never be righteous. To claim that it could be so would be to make ourselves like God, knowing the difference between good and evil (Gn 3). And so the world tempts us toward hatred and envy, hostility, violence and wrong, unfaithfulness, vengeance, cursing, ranting, slander, pride and arrogance. Indeed, the world tempts us to power. Some of the greatest villains in history like Herod the Great, Genghis Khan, Mao, Attila the Hun, and Adolph Hitler sought power. The world tempts us to puff up ourselves and to tear others down to make ourselves look good by comparison. No one is willing to be the least. Everyone wants to sit at the head of the group and to be seen by others (Lk 14). Everyone wants to lord over others (Mt 20:25).

Temptations come also from within. The Tempter need only appeal to our Old Adam to find a willing ally. Scripture says, "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire" (Jas 1:14). Our Old Adam desires wine, women, and song (or what I grew up calling sex, drugs, and rock and roll). We hunger for these things, hoping that they will satisfy. But we can't get no satisfaction, and so we hunger for more. The Tempter tried to sway Jesus' heart, luring Him with bread and the kingdoms of this world. Also, the Old Adam, which ever hangs about our necks like a millstone, tempts us to greed and lies, to steal from our neighbors and to overcharge them or underpay them (Gal 5; Col 3). In short, the Old Adam encourages us to have all kinds of evil lusts, which we feel in our flesh and which society promotes in the news and advertising and on social media. Facebook "likes," salacious shows like "Real Housewives," *Teen Vogue* magazine, and the bad behavior of countless politicians and celebrities often wound and inflame even an innocent heart.

The best weapon in the hour of temptation is the Word of God. Since it's the Tempter's strategy to try to make us think our own human thoughts and not God's thoughts, the best defense is found in the simple words: "It is written." These are the words Jesus Himself uses to conquer the Tempter. Indeed, the Bible calls the Word of God the sword of the Spirit. It is an essential part of the armor that is necessary to "be able to withstand in the evil day" (Eph 6). Concerning those who build their faith on emotion and feeling, it is written that they "in time of temptation fall away" (Lk 8:13). God's Word is a sure foundation, on which we can rely.

To withstand temptation we must watch and pray. We watch and look for ways to avoid the near occasion of sin. We don't play with those things that we know can easily lead to temptation. If our problem is that we drink too much, we don't go and hang out at the bar. If our problem is that we eat too much, we don't stock up our freezer with ice cream. We must not give the devil an opportunity. If we see him coming at us, we flee from him and run to Christ. Jesus Himself, using hyperbole, says, "If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell" (Mt 5:29-30). The point is clear, if you can't control your flesh when certain temptations arise, watch and avoid such occasions.

But some temptations are inescapable. Jesus says we will face temptation at one point or another, even if we remain diligent in our alertness. These we shouldn't complain about; rather, we ought to trust that God is faithful and won't allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear. As St. Paul writes, "With the temptation [God] will also provide the way of escape" (1Co 10:13). God indeed has provided escape from temptation and sin in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Christ Himself was "tempted as we are, yet without sinning" (Heb 4:15). Luther calls Jesus the valiant One who fights for us, alongside us, with us. Most certainly, "because He Himself has suffered and been tempted, He is able to help those who are tempted" (Heb 2). With Christ on our side—or, should we say that He holds us to His side, under His arm and His protection—we can "with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb 4:16). Jesus gives us a sword and shield victorious. What kind of sword? The Word of God, the sacred writing, in which is Christ Himself is revealed. What kind of shield? "The shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one" (Eph 6:16). And so our prayer "But deliver us from evil" is answered.

During this Lententide, let us hold fast to Him who has overcome and conquered the Tempter. Holding fast to Christ, we will learn more and more to understand St. James's word: "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (Jas 1:2-4).

Trusting in and clinging to Christ, we pray as He taught us: “And lead us not into temptation.” Even though the world’s chief false teacher doesn’t understand this petition—even violating Christ’s own Word by rewording it—we understand it properly:

God tempts no one. We pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. Although we are attacked by these things, we pray that we may finally overcome them and win the victory.

We pray for Christ to be with us, granting us power and strength to resist temptation. However, the temptation isn’t taken away or removed. Just as Christ was tempted by the devil and the world, so are those who are in Him. While we live in the flesh and have the devil around us, we can’t escape his temptation and his lies. It can only mean that we must endure trials—indeed, be engulfed by them (2Tm 2:3). But we say this prayer so that we may not fall and be drowned in them.

Your victory is written in the Gospel lesson. Behold your victory! Three times Jesus Christ withstands the devil’s attacks in your place, on your behalf, and for your sake. His victory is yours. He announces the Good News to you that the devil has been routed, that the world holds no lasting sway, and that your sinful nature has been redeemed by His perfect and sinless body. Though the fight continues long, though you still battle against temptations, you already have the victory now because you have the Victor. He has begun a good a good work of victory in you, and He will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Php 1:6).

In His name.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in + Christ Jesus.