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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/11/2007, The Third Sunday in Lent
Isaiah 55:1-9, 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:1-9

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's Bible readings have an air of urgency about them. In our reading from Isaiah 55, for example, we have the lovely exhortation to delay no longer in turning to the Lord:

"Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near... (Isa. 55:6)

Likewise, in our Epistle Reading, St. Paul cautions the Corinthian congregation against spiritual presumption. You can sense Paul's worry for them. There is no time, no time! for immorality. It is a dangerous game. And so, we read Paul's impressive warning to the Corinthians:

Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. (1 Corinthians 10:12, KJV)

And, then, in our Gospel Lesson, the matter of urgency is given its sharpest edge. This fig tree that fails to produce any figs: cut it down!

It is true that the vinedresser intercedes for the fig tree:

"And he answered him, 'Let it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. 'And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.' (Luke 13:8-9)

And yet, the vinedresser is not speaking of infinite patience, but simply of a year.

So, I mean for this sermon to be an encouragement for us if we want to forsake sin and turn to Christ, but worry about the reality of temptation in our lives. We do not want to delay any more. We count now to be the appointed time for repentance and amendment of life. Yet

we are haunted and harassed by the memory that we have fallen in time of temptation in the past and fear that we will again. In case we worry that we shall be forever overmatched by sin, this sermon is meant to encourage us in the matter of temptation.

My main text, then, is from our Epistle Lesson, from St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 10. The precious promise goes thus:

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. 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. (I Cor. 10:13, RSV)

Many a Christian has been comforted and strengthened by this promise. Many have tried to live up to it. Some have failed. It speaks of our freedom to triumph over temptation. It speaks of our freedom to follow Jesus out into the wilderness, where we are sorely tempted, and yet, in spite of the temptation, to come through it well and innocent. May it be so for us, more and more!

Within our text, I believe we can see three themes:

- 1) St. Paul knows that we are a tempted people. He himself is rather shy about his own temptations, but that Christians are a tempted people in many different ways, he does not doubt.
- 2) Second, there is a great fellowship in temptation. None of us sticks out like a sore thumb in our temptations. There is nothing utterly strange about our struggles – nothing that other Christians haven't known, nothing that other Christians haven't triumphed over.

- 3) And third is the promise that we *can* triumph in face of temptation. St. Paul speaks of a way of escape. He is not referring to angels, nor to saints, but to the likes of you and me. God is faithful. His love for us takes the concrete form of providing a way forward for us, no matter how hot the temptation, no matter how low we might be feeling.

May God grant his Holy Spirit to my words and to this contest against temptation.

So, first: we are a tempted people. The apostle knows it. Jesus knows it. If you are enjoying a season of spiritual peace in which you feel no particular temptation, then give thanks to God for this peace, but be prepared to enter the fray again someday.

In Luther's *Large Catechism*, the Reformer speaks of a world that "vexes" us. Day by day, we have occasions a plenty to fall into sin:

We still stumble daily and transgress because we live in the world among people who sorely vex us and give us occasion for impatience, wrath, vengeance, etc. Besides, Satan is at our backs, besieging us on every side...Here again there is great need to call upon God and pray...(*Large Catechism*, on Prayer)

If we lived on some tropical island, with no troubles and no annoyances, maybe we could be more saintly. I do believe we could be, if only there weren't so many people to annoy us. Yesterday, for example, a poor man begged to borrow fifty dollars from our Almoner's Fund. He promised to return shortly, bring back the fifty dollars plus another fifty. I told him that we did not want the additional fifty. We simply wanted him to be a man of truth. And maybe he will be a man of truth someday, but that day, he did not keep his word. He did not return the money. And I know that bit by bit, year by year, this is hardening me. I do not have compassion for strangers knocking on our door as I used to have. We are a tempted people. We are vexed, driven to distraction and impatience. It is the nature of life in this fallen world.

So, that is the first point: The apostle knows that the Corinthians are a tempted people. The Lord knows that we live amidst temptations.

The second point is that whatsoever the besetting temptation, it is not unique to you, neither in its nature, nor its intensity.

There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man...

Be pleased to remember this in time of improper desire: Other folk have been battered by this storm too. When temptation is at fevered pitch, then remember that other Christians have been there too. No temptation is unique to any of us. If we be assailed by storms of frustration, wrath, or lust...if we should feel buffeted by passion or scorched by desire or run over by depression, other Christians know what we are going through, for they have been through it themselves.

Note that St. Paul does not say that they all triumphed in their time of temptation. Nor does he even say that *somewhere, someone* in the long history of the Church triumphed over the very temptation now assaulting you. But the apostle does say this: They all had freedom to triumph, whether or not they did. They had a true chance to weather the storm, not because of any innate goodness in human nature, but because our God is faithful to us.

And this leads me to St. Paul's third theme:

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.

Look, then, for that way of escape.

Again and again in pre-marriage counseling, I have tried to encourage bride and groom by inviting their attention to a feature of their wedding liturgy that passes oh so quickly, but is meant to be a strong help for them for the rest of their lives. I mean, the blessing on the marriage. They have exchange their wedding vows. I have pronounced them husband and wife. They might have kissed. The congregation might have burst into applause. But now comes a real highpoint in

the liturgy: they kneel, no doubt hold hands, and I place my hands upon their heads and pray the prayer of blessing upon their marriage.

God above blesses their marriage, and I want them to know it and feel it — feel it even with my hands. The path of married love upon which they are now starting is an extraordinary path of love. They have ventured upon a way of life that asks them to love and cherish the beloved without condition, without any secret fallback plan, for better for worse. And as they start out on this manner of life, I want them to know that they have God's blessing. I want them to know that as the Triune God governs his creation, he intends to bear them in mind, to always leave space for them so that there is some way forward for them — some door, some window. They need simply to find it because it will be there.

And so it is for the Church — the Bride of Christ — and for each Christian. When the Christian suffers temptation, he should seek that way forward, she should not despair but seek that way of forward. For our God is faithful and will not let us be tempted more than we can bear, but with the temptation will also provide a way of escape, that we will be able to endure it.

I still smile some at Luther's suggestion a few Sundays back that when we are in the midst of temptation, we should think of the Venetians. His point is that we should not dwell or nurse or prolong the temptation, but turn our minds to other subjects, like, say, the Venetians.

But I suspect that the very best way of escape in time of temptation is to ponder, not the Italians, but Christ himself. Wrath, fear, exhaustion, disappointment, covetousness — all manner of distress and desire tempted Jesus — yet he went on his way to the Cross. He understood that to yield to temptation was to let other people down, and he would not. At last, on God's green earth there arose one whose love for others was so vast that he would not permit himself to succumb to temptation.

This Jesus is always the same, yesterday, today, and forever. Still, it is his way of life to triumph over temptation. He would be glad if you and I would walk with him. If he were not risen, he could not fight at our side, to arrange that way of escape of which St. Paul speaks. But he *is* risen, he does fight at our side, he does provide a way of escape for us. His love for us, by which he suffered the Cross that we might live, compels him always to stand at our side in time of temptation, arranging that way of escape for us. And so, a great adventure lies before us — the adventure of triumphing over sin when before we felt ourselves helpless and in bondage to sin.

And this is my final point. It is meant for our encouragement. If we should fall, the large heart of Jesus is ready to pick us up again, and set us out on the adventure anew, fresh and clean. For he is faithful, even when our own faithfulness slips. And in his faithfulness he provides forgiveness and new ways of escape going forward. Let us seek them, to the benefit of ourselves and of neighbors, and to the glory of Jesus who befriends us and to whom glory belongs, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.