

INVOCABIT - FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT
Redeemer Lutheran - Milwaukee
2/20/72

"NO FAULT ASSURANCE"

Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. We put no obstacle in any one's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way:

(II Cor. 6:2b-4a)

In reading the papers and talking with Susan this past month I have heard and seen much about No-Fault insurance. I must admit, and maybe you too, that if such a program could reduce my insurance premiums, I would be most tempted to support it.

We know however that its virtues and drawbacks are not so easily identified. For like its opponents, we realize that few accidents are without fault -- and we also realize that some accidents require longstanding payment for serious pain, injury, or suffering. But also like its proponents, we cheer the program because it would insure all persons, especially those who are innocent victims of uninsured motorists.

We are not here today, however, to resolve the pros and cons of this issue. But this matter does act as a stimulus for our thoughts and inspiration. For it makes us dramatically aware of a tension of life, namely FAULT. The tension, the pain, the suffering caused by FAULT or BLAME or ACCUSATION or JUDGMENT is Paul's suggested agenda for the Church of the Redeemer on this First Sunday in Lent.

Paul says: "We put no obstacle in any one's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way:"

Yes, as Christians this is what we believe ourselves to be--a community of God which puts no obstacles in any one's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry. Yes, this is what we believe ourselves to be--this is our mission--this is our purpose--this is our servanthood--BUT we also recognize that we often fall far short of this mission and purpose. WHY?

Because we must often conform to the world around us-- a world which is obsessed with fault-finding.

In reading one of yesterday's papers, 28 out of 43 articles in the first section were pointing the finger of fault. Obviously, printers are obliged to print the bad news with the good. Anyone who desires only good and comforting news is seriously sedated to the realities of life. But equally true, anyone who rejoices only in exposing faults and deriding humanity suffers from a most sadistic neurosis. I'm afraid that the mood and character of our competitive world tempts us to be more obsessed at present with sadistic fault-finding.

I need only think of this past week to recall the number of times that I was tempted to conform to this pattern. And the temptation often became reality. I am sure that you had similar experiences. And if we were to be completely honest with ourselves, many times we were even right in finding these faults.

But if we have lived out this week or if we will live out next week with those faults lingering and crowding our minds, then we will have truly created A SERIOUS OBSTACLE to future relationships with that person or persons.

And at that point we must ask ourselves; Why do we relish holding onto those faults we see in others? I can think of at least two reasons: you may be able to add others. The first is quite simply, finding fault in others helps us overlook our own. And the second, quite similarly, finding fault in others helps us feel that we are "top dog" -- that we are actually much better than our worldly associates. Needless to say both feelings create obstacles for the future of those relationships.

This is exactly the picture in our Gospel for this day. Worldly power represented by the devil seeks to tempt Jesus to conform to it by finding fault with His ministry. In other words, worldly power demands miraculous stunts from Jesus--if Jesus conforms to the world's desires, then the world feels it can find fault with

Him. The world tempts Jesus to be infatuated with its possessions--then it can find fault with Jesus, because those possessions become an obstacle to His worship of God. But Jesus does not conform to these fault-finding tricks.

How have you and I managed when tempted by the devilish tricks of worldly power? Have we allowed our faults or those of others to become obstacles to our relationship with God or with our fellow human beings?

For instance, how do we deal with our own faults? Our own imperfections? Have yesterdays' faults become such an obsession that they are obstacles to our present relationship with God, with our families, our friends, our fellow worshippers?

How do we deal with the faults of others? IF their faults have hurt us, do we tell them about it or do we run around blaming them for something which they may not know about?

If we see another political or social viewpoint as a fault, do we allow that view to become an obstacle to our relationship with that person or group? OR do we go the second mile? Do we seek to really minister to each other with love and forgiveness in our hearts by actively dialoging with the "faulty" person or group? We all know that such a ministry requires a struggle--maybe even sacrifice.

And isn't that what Paul is talking about when he says: "but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: Through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger;" and the list goes on.

Getting beyond the faults of life is no easy task for the Christian. The world is too much a part of us. And so

It is so much easier to join the angry mob and yell: "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

It is much easier to find fault with human institutions and be heard saying: "Washington sure isn't the school it used to be." How true that may be, but we fail to realize that Washington's black and white struggle might mean a more just, forgiving and accepting world for future generations.

Yes, it's much easier to find fault with and run away from a polluted city--a changing neighborhood--a successful or unsuccessful partner--a dying friend--a complaining critic--yes, a host of other "faulty" persons OR situations. But it requires God-centered faith to call out--"God, help me to wrestle with this problem. Give me the patience and endurance, the love and kindness to withstand the affliction, the hardship, the calamities, the sacrifice of this situation".

Yes, it's even much easier to come to worship and find faults with it than it is to come and share God's love and forgiveness in it. How inviting that temptation is for all of us.

But we have not come here today with that mission or purpose. We have come here again calling for God's presence in our faulty lives and our faulty world. We have come believing that we are God's people--but we have also come recognizing our faults and the faults of others.

And so we NOW know our need for forgiveness.

And like Paul, our brother, we now more clearly understand and proclaim God's mission and purpose for His people. And that word is:

"Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. We put no obstacle in any one's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way:"

Yes, my Christian Friends, we are here today to go beyond fault-finding. Because God has offered each of us NO-FAULT ASSURANCE.

He has removed all obstacles from our relationship with Him, through His Son, Jesus Christ. We now know His

love and forgiveness, even when we have conformed to worldly temptations and pleasures.

God may not offer us a program of No-Fault Insurance, but he does offer us a promise of NO-FAULT ASSURANCE. He ASSURES us that NO FAULTS of ours will be remembered as we turn to Him for forgiveness.

We believe, like Paul, that this is our mission and purpose to each other. This is God's mission and purpose for His people--it is without obstacles for the future, because it does not carry over faults from the past.

We are here today NOT to celebrate or remember the FAULTS, the OBSTACLES, the ACCUSATIONS, the JUDGMENTS of yesterday--those are buried beneath a cross at Golgatha.

We are here today to celebrate and remember that God assures us that He will no longer remember our faults as we turn to Him in repentance.

We are here today to receive His power to do the same for each other--TO FORGIVE, TO REASSURE, TO LOVE EACH OTHER IN REMEMBRANCE OF HIM.

AMEN.

Prayer of the Church -- Invocabit

O Lord, Our God, we give you thanks and praise for the assurance that you will remember no more the faults and failures of yesterday.

Help us, O Lord, to offer the same Spirit to one another.

We ~~XXX~~ know, dear God, we are a people who often delights in fault-finding -- we know also that each of us has his own plague of faults. We call out to you to turn us away from the sin of yesterday; and enable us to live today and tomorrow remembering your forgiveness, and thereby reducing the obstacles that we erect between you and ourselves.

O Father, if we are lead into the wilderness of temptation, deliver us by your power and save us from the pit of evil. Help us especially to wrestle against our natural tendencies to be "top dog" or the easiness of ~~a~~ finding fault in other persons and situations

Let your blessing rest upon our homes. Give parents wisdom to see the influence of your character, so that by their manner of life they may be worthy lights to their children.

Be with all leaders everywhere -- inspire them ^{with} human virtue and divine grace. ~~in~~ *Especially* be with our president as he seeks to break down the divisions and faults that have been ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ obstacles to your loving spirit between nations.

For those among us suffering pain or affliction, heal their ~~the~~ anxiety, their fear and their pain. Comfort the sorrowful with your promises -- give hope and provision to the poor, and bring each of us safely through this week so that we may again share your presence in this way, through J.C., your son, our Lord AMen.

LENT I
Lutheran Church of the Master - Troy
February 16, 1975

"THE REAL TEST"

"The the Spirit led Jesus into the desert
to be tempted by the Devil." Matt. 4:1

There is a common feeling that persons fall away from their faith in days of crisis - when a loved one dies or when chronic illness sets in. There is also a common feeling that persons tend to fall away from faithfulness when things are riding high and happy for them. Certainly, we can find such instances. But by and large, peak days or days of crisis are not the most dangerous days for the faith.

By and large, the most dangerous days for faith are the routine and ordinary days of life. For these are the days of ~~real~~ ~~testing~~. On life's peak days, we've got a good feeling - something special to thank God for, so we're not likely to desert him. In days of crisis, we find heroic courage in ourselves, that before, we would never have believed was there. But those ordinary days - those days which run on and on and on between the peak days and the days of crisis -- these are the days that the Devil - the power of evil works his hardest at testing and tempting.

"The prince of darkness is a gentleman," wrote Shakespeare. His offers are always on easier terms than God's. Credit is easier with Satan than with God. And these offers are always like forks in the road: one is the leading of the Spirit; the other, the easier road, the opportunity for evil; AND WE MUST CHOOSE.

Which road to choose: the high road or the low road, the hard road or the easy road, God's road or Satan's road; yes, we all have encountered this struggle. Choose we must, and in choosing, we know we have been tested. And the tests come, more often than not, on life's routine and ordinary days when we least expect them.

So it happened with Jesus. He had been baptized in the Jordan River, and a voice came to him saying: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." A peak day in Jesus' life. And immediately thereafter Matthew writes, "then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil." The peak day is past. Temptation comes, in the devil's own way, offering terms easier than God's - playing upon reality with meaningful options.

The devil starts to work on Jesus the same way he works on us. He slashes with the knife of doubt: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to turn into bread." The devil's suggestions offers very real and meaningful options. Not only was Jesus hungry, but here was his opportunity to feed half the ancient world that was starving.

Yet - Jesus would not be conned - his mission was more than an economic crusade - he answers by simply reiterating his trust in God.

Christ's church today is faced by the same temptation - torn by the same tension that Jesus must have felt. Pulpits today, that are worth their salt, must relate the Gospel to the social concerns of the day. But there is a danger here - the danger that lies in the temptation to become just another United Fund or social service organization. This is the church's temptation on the one hand.

Then there are these who would take the opposite stand. They insist that the church confine herself to worship services and Sunday school staying out of social problems. How the devil is tempting us in these tensions and decisions. He'd like us to decide for one or the other - either to be a relevant humanitarian food stamp redemption store or an irrelevant spiritual club.

Neither of these options dare be taken. They are both distortions of what we know of God

through Jesus. Feed the poor - YES! But feed the poor so that they understand the food is given in Christian love, and therefore to the glory of God who loves them. Get involved in social issues of the day - YES! But let the involvement ring clear with Christian conviction that we seek social justice in unselfish love for all humanity. Be spiritual - YES! But emphasize that Christian spirituality is responding to God's love in Christ - a response that includes all of life - which means getting involved in a weary world of injustices.

Then there was the Prince of Darkness's second suggestion. It too, was presented to cause doubt. The devil suggested that Jesus prove his divinity by leaping from the top of the Temple. And the devil quotes Scripture to suggest that God will see that his son is not harmed.

Here's another set of meaningful options. "You are, I mean, that is, IF you are the Messiah, jump! Prove to this generation your godship. If you land safely, this spectacular feat will remove all doubt from the people's eyes."

Jesus did not fall for the devil's suggestions. He chose the hard way of carrying out his mission: preaching, talking, teaching, loving. He would not force God's hand by jumping off the top of a building, just to quell people's doubts about his mission.

How is the church of Christ to quell people's doubts today? We've tried the spectacular, all too often, throughout history. Throughout history, faith magicians have made their spectacular claims that they've got a corner on God's power. We've tried the sensational in worship - trying to seup-up our worship so that the jet-set will buy our faith. Pastors have all the latest psychological jargon so that they can impress people with how cool Christianity can be.

*We know all the other sensational spectacles
acts that we are tempted to identify as the least of faith*

But so often our sensational, spectacular sales job is missing the most important ingredient the Gospel. We might be able to perform a spectacular gift or two of the Spirit - but so often we allow ourselves to be tempted to make these gifts THE BASIS of faith. There is the alternative: patient, dedicated preaching and teaching, without distorting the Gospel into what's most saleable - without minimizing Christ's claims upon us - grounding our witness in the love of God. Our faith is not INSTANT UTOPIA - it's the ~~constant~~ long-term labor of forgiving & merciful love.

Which leads to the devil's third suggestion: "I'll give you worldly fame and popularity, if you'll bow down and worship me." Jesus answers: "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve."

This third temptation really comes home. The devil, here, is tempting Jesus to take the road marked: "The end justifies the means." Why go through the agony of waiting for your kingdom? Have it now, Jesus. Be practical, Jesus; be realistic, Jesus; be ready to compromise, Jesus. Then you can have the world. And the only price: simply worshipping the devil.

How the church has fallen prey to this third temptation! We raised armies to capture lands "for the church." Popes tried to rule emperors and thus govern the body politic. Christians tried to dictate religion, not tolerating those who claimed a different belief. OUR very institutions have sometimes had one of the most offensive records of racism and bigotry. Yes, how the church has TOO OFTEN worshipped and bowed down to the devil -- all in the name of remaining popular.

And even more sadly, we've even been tempted to measure by the same standards of everyone around us -- quantitatively, rather than qualitatively. The picture of the church which we want to draw within the church often sounds more

like Chamber of Commerce propaganda than an invitation to the thrilling tension of Christian living. And believe me, I get as caught up in this "image" consciousness as anyone.

It is so easy to take on the ways of the world in any generation. Undoubtedly, this is the greatest of the devil's temptations upon us. We've seen what his appeal to popularity and power can do in politics. God help us to be delivered from his pitch for a power hungry and popular religion. Only strength of will can help us choose the right road when facing this temptation.

We all know how our ordinary and routine days far outnumber the peak and crisis days. We are therefore always encountering THE REAL TEST. Constantly, therefore, we must draw back to God, so that we know the road to choose when faced with the fork in the road.

Your presence here on Sunday - on Wednesday evenings - witnesses to the ongoing struggle in your lives. Like me, I'm sure that every day you find yourselves tempted to take the easy way of evil - esp. on these routine and ordinary days -- on these days when everybody and his neighbor seems to be encouraging us TO COMPROMISE our values. How often we are beckoned each day to worship and bow down to evil.

But - thank God, you have returned to him -- and none of us is perfect - but our presence here means we haven't given up life's greatest principle - namely - TO WORSHIP THE LORD OUR GOD, AND TO SERVE HIM ONLY."

AMEN.

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LENT I
Lutheran Church of the Master, Troy
2-27-77

"GET THE DEVIL OUT OF HERE"

"And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil."
Luke 4:1

I really relish Sundays like this where we have a good action story. The dramatic account of the temptations of Jesus. I relish this kind of narrative because it's so very real for any of us who have ever felt torn by choices.

Luke tells us that Jesus was led by the spirit into the wilderness. That's a religious way of saying that Jesus was being called to go on a retreat. And obviously, the best place for a retreat is a deserted area -- a wilderness spot where there are no interruptions and external demands.

It was there that Luke informs us that Jesus did have an unexpected visitor - the devil. And then Luke gives us the description of the power play

Unfortunately, it's often at this point that too many modern minds tune out this story. So often they do so because they were taught that the devil was a red-suited, ape like man with horns and a pitch fork. And they dismiss the whole account -- AND SO WOULD I if I had that picture of the devil.

How regrettable, however, that today's intelligencia have such small and unimaginative minds. So sad that they cannot see the devil as a spiritual power much like the invisible power of magnets.

Luke here depicts Jesus totally isolated from supporters or enemies -- from opinions or judgments of others, whether positive or negative. He's all alone! He has nobody to rely on but himself -- he can't blame anyone for the present moment.

It's at that place that Jesus encounters two powerful but opposing CLAIMS upon his life. It is

up to Him to decide which one will make the great claim -- which one will take control from here on.

~~Maybe this desert picture isn't graphic enough for you and me. Let's just say Jesus had been led by God to the middle of Lake Michigan in a raft for 40 days.~~ **Yes He has** one job to do there: to consider his options. Namely, how should he carry out his ministry? He had just been baptized-- clearly exalted above all people as God's son. NOW - how should he carry out His ministry?

Should he use his powers to satisfy the physical needs of people? I.E., should he make the satisfaction of the body the absolute goal of life?? Oh, how tempting that was - especially when he was so hungry! Or, should he attract the curious by putting on a good religious show?? Wow, could he get the glory that way! Should he capture the kingdom of this world by any means possible and transform that into the kingdom of God?

How tempting that was!! He could bill himself as the greatest show on earth just to get the people there. Wow -- he could con them into the Kingdom of God.

Yes, how tempting to get the glory now -- and not wait for the future glory promised by his Father. Yes, "tempting" which in the original greek means "to test." Jesus had been led by the spirit to a deserted place -- and there he would be tested.

God did not desire His only Son to be some kind of religious, robot-like, "Yes" man. He was not to be a computer man. God wanted Jesus to be real-- to experience the fullness of humanity -- including real temptation.

So, Jesus - like you and me - encountered all the options, good and bad. And Jesus himself had to wrestle with them and determine what path he would follow. God did not intercede to make the struggle easy -- that would have made this relationship into a puppeteers game.

Jesus had been given the Word through Scripture just like you and me -- now it was his decision --

now it was his time for soul searching
in the wilderness.

I believe it's important that you and I see clearly that Jesus was not spared the struggle between opposing powers. Without this disclosure, Jesus becomes just another Sesamee Street muppet, with God in control. But this struggle (and probably Jesus had many more) confirms that Jesus experienced the fullness of humanity.

And anyone of us who has taken our trust in God seriously has encountered the same conflict. How shall we use our gifts of life, health, earning power, time, and talents?? Shall we use them to fulfill God's purpose -- or other things that often erode God's dominance in the world. Nearly all of us know this struggle -- made so difficult because the line between God's purpose and my own is never perfectly delineated.

But how often we simply want to give up on the struggle -- simply give up on God. And when we feel that temptation, then we know who's gaining control.

How often I recall that wilderness struggle in myself -- which for me often occurs as I'm sitting by myself in McDonalds. How often I've heard that little voice say: "Come on, Peter, get out of this religion thing and get into something that really counts -- get into a lucrative field." Or other times, the voice says - "J^Ust get an 8 - 5 job; God isn't worth all this time."

And for all of you, I'm sure you've heard the voice. He probably says: "Ah, come on, stay in bed Sunday mornings," or maybe he says, "you don't have to go to church to be a Christian," or maybe "you don't have to pledge anything to God's mission on earth."

How tempting the devil can be! No doubt about it - he's out to dilute, confuse, or destroy the power of God and his love in Christ.

And if he doesn't get us to give up - then he'll try another wrinkle. He'll take our guilt and

imperfection and magnify it so much that it will blind us to God's mercy. He'll take religious things - like denominational differences -- and twist our minds so that we play the game of "Denominational Put Down." He'll take our natural and good sexual desires and turn them into a perverse, consuming power. He'll DISTORT anything to disconnect us from God's energizing power.

Obviously, some people in society don't seem to experience any of these struggles. Be assured -- it's not because of their faith convictions. Quite to the contrary, they've already sold out. They may smile and do good deeds, but God no longer has any controlling interest in their lives. They have made their choice -- call it the devil, call it sin, call it egocentricity, call it narcissism, call it hedonism or pleasure seeking. Call it by whatever label you prefer -- Luke simply calls it the devil: a power which denies God's claim upon us.

But like Jesus, those of us who still struggle -- who go from the ecstasies to the agonies of belief -- God promises he will not desert us. We have been given comprehensive insurance against the evil one.

Luke says: Jesus was led by the Spirit. And you and I are being led by the same. That doesn't mean we have a closed circuit system to heaven nor loudspeakers directing our every step.

But we do have His Word -- and that's all we need. Note that it was Deuteronomy that Jesus used to challenge the devil. Like Jesus, we believe that Word has power and will direct us.

Lent offers us an additional resource for being led by the Spirit. Surely just by looking at the announcements in the bulletin you see the power we're trying to uplift this Lent.

But like Jesus, the options are up to you and me. God does not have us on puppet strings.

God has given us life on earth -- and by that very design every one of us will encounter many moments in the wilderness. It is especially during those moments that we know whether we are his or not. Yes, that's a struggle. But Jesus could not bypass it; and neither can we.

God help us to say like our Lord: "Get the devil out of here."

AMEN

LENT I
Luth Church of the Master, Troy
3-4-79

"FOR US!"

"If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? ... For there is nothing in all creation that will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Romans 8:31-32, 39

Almost every one in this room has wondered at one time or another whether God is FOR HIM, OR AGAINST HIM. Especially under tragic or difficult circumstances - people are often perplexed with this problem. In fact, I would be willing to speculate that a very high percentage of people join the church IN ORDER TO GET GOD ON THEIR SIDE.

We all want GOD FOR US! And that's exactly where God takes his stand: ALWAYS FOR US! But all too often we question that - and sometimes even defy it, esp. when under the pressures of extra stress.

In other words - ~~many~~ of us have entertained the notion that God is actually OUT TO GET US at certain times -- that he is actually against us. ~~I need only look over this past~~
~~recall how this has been illustrated.~~

For instance, when we have been diagnosed as seriously ill -- haven't most of us at least wondered if God had possibly caused the illness ... and in fact, haven't some of us even thought that God was possibly causing the illness to punish us for something else??

Yes - we are often tempted to question if God is for us BECAUSE THERE ARE OFTEN MANY THINGS AGAINST US. As I reflect on this past week - I can think of several situations which might have caused people to think THAT LIFE (and even God) was DEFINITELY AGAINST THEM!

For instance, June Shelton spent this last week of her life in excruciating pain. What a terrifying impact that must have been to her psyche and spirit. During her agonizing moments of consciousness - I'm certain she wondered who or what WAS FOR HER -- and who was against her.

Likewise - the time spent this past week with those who are struggling to keep fragile relationships together. Surely for these people they must wonder if ANYONE IS FOR THEM!

Likewise for those persons who don't have or who have lost relationships. They desire so much TO KNOW - TO FEEL - TO BE ASSURED that there is someone for them ... yet their solitude, and sometimes their self-pity, can often make them feel THAT EVERYTHING IS AGAINST THEM.

And then there are those who have ^{alerted me} ~~shared~~ ^{to} their financial frustrations. In a society where we see people flaunting so much -- it is truly terrorizing to be faced with little.

Yes, we dare not kid ourselves about life.... things haven't changed so radically since St. Paul's day. It's obvious from his letter that he was faced with tribulation (a feeling of helplessness) ... with distress (the struggle to succeed) ... with persecution ... with famine ... with what he called nakedness, which we would call emptiness today ... yes, and he says with peril or sword - obviously meaning the threat of death.

It's only too obvious from Paul's letter that Christians in every age have faced catastrophic forces which are against them. But Paul also wastes no time in establishing the fact that these destructive forces are not THE INTENTION of God.

Quite to the contrary, Paul proclaims that God forever seeks to be for us! He will let nothing take us out of his hands. And he gives up his Son for our sake IN ORDER THAT HIS INTENTION CAN BE UN-MISTAKENLY CLEAR TO US. He is unequivocally for us -- even when cancer, inflation, divorce, isolation, and death are against us. Through Jesus Christ - these forces will not be the victors ... our relationship with God will conquer all these INCLUDING THE LAST ENEMY, DEATH ITSELF!

And because God is FOR US -- our whole mode of operation in the world can be freed from terror and fear. We no longer need TO BE TOTALLY DEPENDENT UPON any place, any thing, any person, any circumstance, or any force in this world.

because
Even when evil comes upon us, we are confident that ultimately God will offer us HIS PEACE, whether that's in the form of forgiving love or the resurrection of the body. The evil will not ultimately defeat us -- even though like cancer, it may cause our death.

And it is up to the body of Christ to make sure that God's reassurance is given to every soul in need of it. His body, the church, is called to enlighten the hearts and minds of anyone suffering from the despair of life's destructive forces.

As God's body - we wouldn't think of sitting by allowing someone to die WITH THE ILLUSTION THAT GOD WAS AGAINST HIM. We wouldn't think of overlooking the one who is seriously ill -- or tragically alone -- or overwhelmed with guilt. For God is against these conditions and FOR these people.

So once again he gathers us around the table... reminding us THAT HE IS UTTERLY FOR US ...

TOTALLY FORGIVING US ... COMPASSIONATELY
MAKING US ONE IN BODY AND SPIRIT WITH HIM.

And because we have been so graciously
treated ... we will leave this altar NOT ONLY
TO GO HOME FOR LUNCH, but we will leave here
with more of Christ than we came with. We will
leave here with more of his power IN US. We
will leave here wanting to reassure others
this week THAT GOD IS FOR THEM.

Yes, we will leave here knowing that there
is nothing in all creation that can separate
us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our
Lord.

AMEN

LENT I

Hope Lutheran, Toledo

February 23, 1980

"A WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE"

"And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil."
Luke 4:1

Hardly a month goes by in my ministry that someone does not quote that famous 13th verse from the 10th chapter of Corinthians: "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."

Usually people quote this verse when they are going through a struggle of temptation ... possibly when they are about to give up.

There's a story of a pastor who felt he had done a superb job with his 7th & 8th grade catechism class on the topic of temptation. He felt he had led the class to understand that God always gives an individual the strength he needs to bear the burdens of life and to overcome evil temptations.

At the end of the class, he asked, "Are there any questions?" A hand slowly rose in the back row, and an 8th grade boy said: "Well, Pastor, I know that God doesn't make us do evil. And I know that He only tests our faith to give us a chance to grow stronger as His children. But, I still think that he overdoes it sometimes!"

I think if we're really honest with ourselves, most of us would agree with that 8th grader. Each of us has been given a wilderness experience in life -- possibly several. These have been the times that we are all alone -- possibly packed up against the wall -- often caught in a conscious struggle between claims upon our lives.

no better example than the
hostages in Iran. The great temptation -2-
is to give up on God and everything.

of struggle.

These "wilderness experiences" often occur during serious illnesses, during occasions of heated passions, during times of failure, during days of financial distress, during moments of loneliness -- and many other circumstances. They are those deserted times that we really wonder if God has given us the strength or the way of escape to endure them. LIKE the 8th grade boy-- these are the times that we might think: "I think God is overdoing it!"

We encounter Jesus in the same predicament in his wilderness experience in the dessert. It's regrettable that some people dismiss this story because they reject the notion of the devil. Most often they reject an idea of the devil because they are still living with that kindergarten notion of a red-suited, horn-sprouting guy with a pitch fork. I would also dismiss this story if that were the real notion of the devil.

But faith does not teach that understanding of the devil. Faith teaches that the devil is a spiritual power, much like the invisible power of a magnet. You can't see the power of a magnet -- but with the proper object THE POWER IS MOST DEFINITELY THERE.

Such is the case of humanity and the devil. We can't see him - but we surely know his magnetic power of attraction. His power makes a claim upon our lives. His power drives us to deny God's power. So it is that anything or anyone which drives us to deny God's will and power CAN LEGITIMATELY BE DEFINED AS THE POWER OF EVIL, or the devil.

It should be obvious then that God does not overdo it -- he does not seek to test us beyond our capabilities. But at the same time -- the power of evil is no friend of God. Call it the devil, call it the power of evil, call it hedonism, call it demonic -- regardless of

the devil, there is a real power forever driving us to deny God's claim upon our lives. That same power is forever seeking to distort, confuse, dilute or destroy God's purpose for life - to love as he first loved us.

No better illustrations could be given than those confronted by Jesus. For Jesus the Wilderness Experience had been forty days of fasting. The power of evil always attacks our most vulnerable area. Obviously - Jesus weakness at this point was physical hunger. So it is that the devil tries to get Jesus to make religious faith into the acquisitions of physical things: "Turn these stones into bread."

Almost all of us have fought this fight with the devil. He wants us to make physical life and physical possessions into the bottom line of our faith. Once we do that - he knows he's got us, because he knows that physical things go the route of rust and dust.

Jesus' response dramatically puts this area of temptation in perfect Christian perspective: "Man shall not live by bread alone." Jesus is not saying that bread, that physical life and possessions are unimportant - but he is saying that THESE ARE NOT THE BASIS OF OUR CHRISTIAN HOPE AND FAITH.

But the evil one doesn't give up with only one try. Next he tries to get Jesus to reduce faith into mere political or nationalistic allegiances. As we all know - the Jews lived under domination of the Romans. They longed to be free. Here the devil tempts Jesus to make his religious authority **SYNONYMOUS WITH THE POLITICAL CLOUT** of the day. He tells Jesus he will give him the authority to rule the kingdoms of the world.

Every sincere Christian is faced with this wilderness experience at some time in his life: we are tempted to turn our religious faith into nationalistic flag-waving - *EQUATING NATION'S CAUSES AS GOD'S CAUSES* - OR TEMPTED TO MAKE OUR CORPORATE POWER OR POLITICAL POWER EQUAL TO GOD.

The 70's saw many men in high office fall because they had equated their own political ~~POWER~~ with the purposes of God. Not least among these was Billy Graham who allowed religious faith to become highly identified with the oval office. In his recent biography, Graham has admitted being lured *by* the trappings of political power, esp. the friendships of presidents. Obviously - his defense and devotion to Richard Nixon *did* cause the Graham Crusade considerable embarrassment and tribulation.

Jesus' response to the temptation of nationalism and political self-righteousness is: "You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve."

Finally - the devil ^{tempts} ~~sees~~ Jesus to make religion into a superman business. He tries to convince Jesus to promote the notion THAT THERE ARE NO RISKS for the faithful -- that religion is the realm of superpower, where you never get hurt even if you jump from the pinnacle of temples.

Every one of us has done battle with the devil in this den of deceit. The devil would like to convince us that by being faithful we will not have to suffer -- or encounter any risks, hazards, or tragedies in life. He loves to get us to believe this -- because then he knows he has set us up for despair and possible rejection of God.

Our faith tells us something quite different. Right from the beginning - from Genesis - God

clearly says: Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." God has not created us to be super-people; he has created us to be his mortal lovers on earth. With that mortality comes all the risks of life.

In fact - as Christians, we even have greater risks, because Jesus tells us to pick up our crosses and follow him. Just like his disciples, he does not urge us to live free of risks -- he calls us to take the risks of sacrifice. Being faithful not only means accepting suffering -- sometimes it ~~leads to~~ suffering.

Obviously - Jesus does not urge us to become masochists - or martyrs. But ~~meanwhile~~ following him does not mean a painless existence. To follow Christ is not to be without A WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE\$. In fact, those confrontations between God's claim and the devil's decept never end. As the devil said to Jesus: "I will depart until a more opportune time."

Jesus' gift to us is that he gives us more than bread & physical possessions -- he gives us more than political parties and flags to wave -- he gives us more than a life without suffering.

He ~~gives us~~ **LOVE** without any limits. He risked everything to show no matter the cost, he would not give up on us. That is the greatest gift that we've been given -- ~~and that we can offer.~~ To endure the trials in the wilderness, yet remaining faithful servants of his love.

It was for that reason that James said in his letter: "blessed is the man who endures the trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him."

AMEN

LENT I
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
February 20, 1983
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"NO SHORT CUTS TO GLORY!"

"Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Holy Spirit for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil."
Luke 4:1

Faced with trials - tribulations - testings - and difficulties -- how would you rate our present age?? Would you say that we handle hardship well -- or would you say that we tend to run from testing circumstances? Do we cope well with our limitations -- or do we retreat and compromise when confronted by difficult choices??

There are no easy or categorical answers to these questions, but several authors claim that they sense disturbing trends in our culture. One author has summed up the mentality of the day in five easy phrases:

Make it easy
Make it quick
Make it fun
Make it entertaining
Above all, make it cheap!

I'm not certain I would fully agree with this author. But there is some real truth in his analysis. We live in an age that is obsessed with ease and pleasure -- with fun and entertainment. As a teacher - I continually hear students say that an exercise is not worthwhile or credible UNLESS it is fun and entertaining.

The same students say: "don't make an assignment or a task... or project too difficult...or too lengthy ... or too thought-provoking.. or something which requires effort and sacrifice. The basic philosophy too often seems to be -- don't expect me to give too much of myself, because after all I have to take care of number one FIRST & FOREMOST!

And juxtaposed to this attitude is a mentality which excuses dishonesty and theft and violence and billigerance. Likewise - there is a reluctance to encourage hard work -- there is a permissiveness which encourages compromise and no restraint -- there is a philosophy which gives only lip service to discipline and

responsibility -- as well as a marketing strategy which thrives on tempting people to live beyond their means and without clear moral standards.

Possibly I am overstating the case. But many sociologists would tend to agree that technological sophistication has caused us to expect a quick-fix for everything from cancer to cooking. We live in an age where we expect immediate, miraculous solutions to all sorts of problems. Technology and instant information -- which have truly offered us great opportunities -- at the same time have become our false gods. We now expect today's problems to be solved yesterday.

And what does this all have to do with the biblical context of Jesus in the wilderness with the devil?? Quite simply - it means the devil is still alive and well -- he's just wearing a better camglouge today than he used to. Obviously -- he's not outfitted in a red suit with horns and spear-fork. Most of us gave up that notion of the devil when we graduated from grade school. But we can't dismiss the power of evil by merely disarding the outer garments. Every age has its manifestation of the Evil One. And in our age -- much like that of Jesus -- there is still a power which drives us to COMPROMISE -- to SELF GLORIFICATION -- to GREED AND POWER PERVERSION and to LUST FOR ONLY THE PHYSICAL BREAD OF LIFE.

The circumstances facing Jesus in the wilderness were not that totally different from those facing you and me many days. He was confronted by conflicting claims on his life. The question in short was how should he use his God-given power?? Should he make the satisfaction of his body the absolute goal of his life? Should he merely live for bread alone?

Should he use his spiritual powers as if he were some kind of carnival side-show freak?? Should he throw himself from the top of the temple just to make a big religious impression? Should he allow the evil one to tempt him to take the short cut to glory?? It would sure be alot easier than all the teaching ... and physical denial ... and sacrifice ... and struggle ... and humiliating death that lay ahead of him??

Jesus was put to the full and radical human test! God would not allow his own son to go the easy way in this world. He did not

want his son to be a robot-like "Yes" man. He was not merely to be a pre-programmed computer of God. God wanted Jesus to experience the fulness of humanity ~~W~~WITHOUT ANY SHORTCUTS!!

Contrary to the mentality of our day -- God **did** not make it easy ... did not make it fun ... did not make it quick ... did not make it entertaining ... and did not make it cheap for his very own Son. He gave Jesus nothing more than he has given you and me -- he gave him his Word -- namely -- "Man shall not live by bread alone; you shall worship the Lord your God, and him alone shall you serve; You shall not tempt the Lord your God."

Those were simple -- but sufficient Words when confronted with temptation. They are still the words today that empower us when we are confronted by temptation. There is no short-cut in the struggle. God makes clear that if there were no short cut for Jesus -- there will surely be no short cut for us.

The glory of God's love does not come in specially wrapped packages that can be popped into a personal computer and come out justified perfect in a few seconds. God will not compromise and dilute his love that way. His love was costly on Calvary some 2000 years ago -- and it still costs self-denial, and sacrifice, and follow-through, and commitment, and perseverance today!

The tempter -- the Evil One -- has not changed. He still wants to dilude us into thinking that there are short-cuts to glory. He still wants us to compromise and choose the quick fix to life's problems-- whether it's the quick fix of drugs and alcohol -- or the easy-out of quitting. We all know how tempting that Evil One can be.

How often I've heard that tempter coming into my wilderness moments and telling me: "Come on, Peter, get into something that really counts. Get out of this religion business -- it's not worth all the sacrifice and long hours. Get into something that really pays off -- come on with me and I'll help you turn these stones into some real bread!"

Each of us can tell a similar story about the Evil One -- he's very much alive and well -- always waiting for that moment when we

Overburdened
are alone - or confused - or grieved -- or guilty. It's at that moment that he moved in to dilute or destroy our relationship to God and one another. He moves in to tell us that he has a better way -- an easier way -- a more entertaining way -- and cheaper way than the self-giving love of God. He tells us that the way of God takes a whole lifetime of love and service before the crown of glory. He says he'll give us the crown of glory, right now -- no waiting, no self-denial, no sacrifice -- everything RIGHT NOW for you and me!!

We all know how tempting that mentality can be. Like Jesus, we've all had our moments in the wilderness -- and we will have many more such moments. Moments like Christ himself, where we must ask ourselves: HOW SHALL I USE MY GOD-GIVEN GIFTS... MY GOD-GIVEN POWERS?? Shall I use them only for my own bodily good... for my own omnipotent glory?? Or to glorify God and serve others??

God reminds us today through the struggle of Jesus the Christ that the glory of bread... the glory of earthly godliness and earthly power ARE ONLY REALITIES FOR A FEW DECADES. There are not the ultimate good nor the ultimate power.

Only the self-giving love of Christ is victorious over the momentary glories of this world. That self-giving love of Christ was no easy way -- no quick-fix for all of life's ills -- no short cut to getting God's crown of glory -- no retreat from the struggles and temptations of the world.

But that self-giving love is the reason that we are here this morning -- because we need to be re-energized with God's Word and Sacrament -- for they not only offer comfort -- but esp. offer strength to do battle with the temptation to compromise and retreat from a self-giving lifestyle.

God has blessed us with the self-giving and forgiving love of his Son, Jesus Christ. It was no piece of cake for Jesus Christ; and it has never been any easier for his disciples who have chosen to follow in the footsteps of the cross. There is no short cut to love like Christ -- but there is the glory of a long term reward.

AMEN

LENT I
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
February 24, 1985
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"NOTHING WILL SEPARATE US!"

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 8:38-39

It's interesting that I gave Frances my sermon title before leaving for Wisconsin on Thursday morning. At 10:30 a.m. yesterday morning, when I learned that our 11:10 flight to Toledo had been cancelled, I chuckled ~~as I repeated~~ ^{as I} my sermon title: "Nothing Will Separate US." What a joke! "Nothing" but bad weather or the cancellation of Air Wisconsin flights, that is. It doesn't take much, does it, to cause SEPARATION these days between people. There's all kinds of separating forces in life -- the ultimate being death.

Paul asks in this text: "If God is for us, then who or what can be against us?" And we know the answer to that question is "PLENTY" -- and so does Paul. There's a lot more than cancelled flights that cause separation in this world. In fact, Paul himself gives a list of those things that can cause deeply hurtful separation. Not only separation from each other, but even the feeling of separation from the love of God.

TROUBLE/OR TRIBULATION. The feeling of helplessness to shape the future destiny of our lives ... the feeling that we have lost control ... the feeling that the forces of nature are totally against us. How easily tribulation can separate us from the love of God as well as each other.

HARDSHIP/or DISTRESS. The constant struggle to stay afloat ... to be successful ... to manage your life and still put up with all the difficulties. How easily hardship can separate us from the love of Christ.

PERSECUTION. The threat of being "put down" or "cut off" or fired or crucified by your boss, or your board of directors

or possibly even persecuted by your own spouse or family. Persecution certainly makes us feel separated from the love of God.

FAMINE. There are millions of starving people worldwide who are feeling very SEPARATED from the love of God -- especially when they see our abundance ... when they see us erecting hundreds of fast-food outlets ever year ... or going out to MacDonaldis a couple of times a week. Can we blame them for feeling separated from God and from us?

NAKEDNESS. Obviously, Paul is not talking about nudity here -- but rather emptiness. He means the raw feeling of being next to a spouse or friend or lover, yet feeling like there are miles of distance between you. How real that separation feels -- such a devastation to either God's love or human love.

PERIL /or SWORD. Need we even be reminded of the ever-escalating tendency of our world toward war and nuclear annihilation? Nothing will be ~~more~~ totally SEPARATING and DESTRUCTIVE to the love of God than the war games of the 21st century.

When Paul says: "If God is for us, then who can be against us?" WE ALL KNOW THE ANSWER. There is plenty that is against us each and every day. We don't need to be taken out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit to be tested and tempted to "deny the love of God." The world around us is already a wilderness -- we are surrounded by a desert of hostile forces seeking to separate us from God's love ... and seeking to separate us from one another.

But God will not let that world have the LAST WORD. He will not allow the tribulation, distress, and persecutions of life to be victorious. He wants us to understand that they will always be there -- to be alive is to encounter these negative realities ... they cannot be avoided. But they will not overcome us, because Jesus Christ has already overcome them. And through Jesus Christ -- God has the final word on the life of his faithful. NAMELY, NOTHING IN ALL CREATION WILL SEPARATE US FROM HIS LOVE ... WHICH HAS BEEN WON FOR US THROUGH CHRIST THE LORD.

That's the Good News that keeps us going even in spite of all the threats of life around us. That's the Good News that keeps us faithful -- that God will not allow us to be separated from him. He will not allow the forces of nature or the world TO SEPARATE US FROM HIM OR HIS LOVE.

We need to hear that Word from God, and especially we need to remind one another of that Good News when we are facing tribulation, distress, or persecution. Because under those circumstances we all need a word of Hope ... and there is ultimately only one word of Hope for those circumstances - NAMELY, GOD'S WORD. His word is the only word which assures no lasting separation. But of course, the forces of nature and the world are not the only sources of wilderness experiences. There are certainly other causes of separation.

What about our own disobedience ... our own sinfulness ... our own impulsive acts of rebellion and wrong-doing against God and one another?!? Will not these actions be the real cause for our separation from God's love?

I think the Old Testament story of Noah so classically helps us to see God's answer to our dilemma with sin. The legend of Noah's day shows mankind as very wicked, very disobedient, and downright rebellious of God. So God decided to start all over again. He destroyed the earth and its inhabitants, save one righteous man and his family and some animals. And what did that righteous man do after he was spared destruction?? He proceeded to get stoned drunk! How is that for a grateful response of thanksgiving and obedience?? Doesn't sound too different from today, does it?

The story of Noah is the story of the failure of judgment as a remedy for man's sin. Judgment does not change man's basic rebellion (as we have so well learned through our system of incarceration). You can take a child and punish that child for his disobedience -- but the punishment will not make the child a better person or more loving child. Punishment may be necessary -- in a society, punishment is often necessary -- but it will never alter the character of humanity.

In Jesus Christ we see a different way. We see a God who

is somewhat like the father who told his son he would send him to the attic to sleep (with only bread and water) if he were disobedient once more. As you have already guessed, knowing little boys, the son wasted little time in again being disobedient. And as promised, his punishment was to take up residence for the night in the attic.

The father could not eat any of his supper that night. He just sat there, not saying a word. When it came time for bed, the father could not sleep. His wife tried to console him by saying: "Honey, you did the right thing -- the boy must learn his lesson ... you must not go back on your word."

Finally, after another restless hour, the father said: "You're absolutely right! I will not break my word. But I also know he must feel totally separated up there." So he kissed his wife good night, grabbed the sleeping bag, and went up to the attic to eat bread and water with his son. And the two of them fell fast asleep together in the sleeping bag. There was punishment, but there was no separation -- for "there is nothing in all creation that will separate those who truly love like their Lord."

As you can guess, I believe God is like that father. He knows we must sometimes experience punishment for our disobedience. But he will never abandon us -- he will never leave us all alone. Instead he will suffer our punishment with us (as he did on a cross) to assure us of his never-ending love. He will never let punishment or judgment be his FINAL WORD.

The facts are that we often do create our own wildernesses in life. We often do foolish things which make us look faithless and faltering in God's sight and one another's. It's like the story some years ago of Alabama and Rice playing in the Cotton Bowl. Neither team had been able to do anything for the first three quarters. Then Dickie Magel from Rice got the ball -- and with no Alabama defender anywhere near him -- he began a 90-yd romp for the T.D.

The players on the Alabama bench desperately sat there watching Dickie head for the goalline. Nobody would touch him from Alabama. In total frustration, one of the players from the Alabama bench jumped up, ran onto the field, made a shoe-string tackle at the 25 yd-line, then ran back

to the bench and sat down ... as if nobody had seen him. Of course, thousands of people had seen him -- and they were all screaming: "Throw him out! Crucify him! Hang him from the goalposts by his shoestrings!" The crowd was furious.

Well, the touchdown was awarded to Rice. And the tackler sat all alone on the bench, hanging his head in shame. He could no more explain his impulsive move than any of us can when we do foolish, impulsive, illegal things. His only mistake was that he broke the rules with 75,000 people seeing his weakness. A few minutes later, the Alabama coach walked over to the player and said: "O.K. son, you made a mistake, but you are still part of the team."

I believe that's God's message to us after our acts of disobedience, rebellion, and stupidity. He knows that we are an impulsive, easily frustrated, and often tempted people. He knows that often causes us to make mistakes ... to do stupid things. But he takes the initiative to come to us -- he does not want us alone, feeling lost and rejected, full of guilt and despair. He comes to us and says: O.K., so you made a mistake, but remember, you are always a part of my team.

"Nothing can separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ our Lord."

As many of you already know, there is hardly a funeral that I do not share this text. It has been read by me hundreds of times to bring comfort and reassurance to those feeling the tribulation, distress, and emptiness of loss. There will be at least ONE MORE TIME that this text will be read FOR ME rather than BY ME. And that will be my own funeral.

Thanks be to God that there is no wilderness experience, no mistake, no tribulation, no trespass or distress in life that can OR will ever separate us from his love.

AMEN

LENT I
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
February 12, 1989
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"THE NEVER-ENDING STRUGGLE!"

Then we cried to the Lord the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey." Deut 25:8f

"And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil." Luke 4:1

Today, the first Sunday of Lent - every year the Sunday for the story of temptation. Well, I could easily be TEMPTED today to overlook the greatest "holy day" of February. But let it never be said that Peter Martyn was tempted to overlook the holy of holies in the minds of Hope's people. I shall not be accused on this Feb. 12th of being tempted to overlook the sentimental saintliness enshrined forever on Feb. 14th! So here you have it - now no one can say that I overlooked Valentine's Day. But of course, you can all say that the devil tempted me to think more highly of cupid than God.

Don't we all wish that FAITHFUL LOVE was as simple as sending a Valentine! Unlike the beauty of Barbara Streisand in Evergreen, "love is NOT as soft as an easy chair!" Yes, how tempting to fool ourselves and others even about the fidelity of love.

It reminds me of the story of John Charles who came home from elementary school with an encouraging report card. But on the bottom were the teachers' words of caution: "John Charles is a very bright and alert student; however, I believe he spends too much time playing with the girls. I want you to know, as his parents, that I am working on a plan to break him of this tempting habit." // John Charles' mother acknowledged the report card - but below her signature she wrote to the teacher: "Let me know if your plan works with John Charles; I'd like to try it on his father."

The struggle of temptation is not only child's play - IT IS THE NEVER-ENDING STORY OF OUR LIVES. Last summer and fall, filmmaker Martin Scorsese's "The Last Temptation of Christ" got a lot of hoopla from the press and religious right. I did not see the film for reasons of the heart. But regardless of our opinions of a "too human Jesus," the film forced everyone to deal with the NEVER-ENDING STRUGGLE of being human - the battle between God and Satan. And I'm told that Scorsese's film ends consistent with the Bible - God wins the battle!

Let's face it - only the naive in this room believe that the Bible depicts every temptation of Christ. The Bible never

intended to give us EVERY detail of Jesus' struggle with temptation. However, God did want us to know that Jesus was just as human as each of us -- he struggled to remain faithful just like you and me. THIS SON OF GOD WOULD NOT BE SPARED OUR NEVER-ENDING STRUGGLE. Of course, Jesus may have had hundreds of satanic struggles. But for our purposes, Matthew and Luke offer just one major incident so that we can be certain that Jesus did battle. Thankfully, unlike Scorsese's film fantasy, Jesus remains fully faithful to the will of God.

So now that we know Jesus too was tempted - WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE? What do we do with TEMPTATION ... and how do we overcome it. First, the simple answers to these questions. First - we acknowledge temptation as a reality of life -- rather than denying its existence. Second, we admit that we cannot by our own powers, understanding, strength or intelligence OVERCOME IT!! We can only trust God to uplift us each and every time we do battle.

So now that we've acknowledged it - how can we better do battle with it? How can we better fight off this power which denies the goodness of God's spirit within us? Well, first, we must get beyond the trivial forms of temptation so often made to be the biggees of Lent. Temptation is more than eating too many desserts or too much chocalate; temptation is more than wanting a prime rib every day; temptation is more than lusting after Vanna White or Robert Redford! TEMPTATION IS ANY RESPONSE OR REFLECTION OF OURSELVES WHICH IS CONTRARY TO GOD'S CREATION OF WHOSE WE ARE, WHO WE ARE, OR WHY WE ARE!

The first big temptation is to forget WHOSE WE ARE! We show this most by being obsessed with perfection, and then getting down on ourselves for being imperfect. The devil's crafty power here is doubt! Self-doubt, insecurity, impersonalism, the inability to be the best -- these are the tools of the devil's trade. These are the powers that cause us to forget WHOSE WE ARE!!

The devil said to Jesus, "IF you are the Son of God." He wanted Jesus to question his true identity with God -- the identity God gives as a gift!! When you and I are suffering, when we're overburdened, when we're really feeling low -- the satanic strategy is to cause us to doubt OUR GOD-GIVEN IDENTITY ... OUR ONENESS WITH GOD. "If you are really a child of God, then you would pray more." "If you're truly God's child, then you would not have such questions." "If you're really a good Christian, then you'll never have lustful thoughts." "If you are really God's child, you will never be selfish." "If you're truly a disciple of Christ, then you'll never suffer defeat ... you'll certainly overcome cancer ... you'll never feel guilty, etc."

THE NEVER-ENDING STRUGGLE IS TO FORGET WHOSE WE ARE!! We are precious persons of God's love, not perfect print outs of Jesus Christ. Our computer age has even intensified our struggle; it's created ever greater reasons for self-doubt.

Prof. Carl Hoefler says that today's computer mentality has made us into thinking of ourselves as numbers - "we have lost our baptismal identity as important persons in God's BOOK OF LIFE." When asked to identify ourselves at the supermarket or mall, the cashiers do not ask, "Who are you?" - they mumble, "Your license, please." And most of the times they don't even look at our pictures -- they just copy down the numbers.

How crucial for us to be rescued from the temptation toward perfection and impersonalization so rampant in both the church and society today. As the OT reminds us today, "we are still wandering Arameans; we still suffer the bondage of oppression and perfection; we still are afflicted by the impersonalization of our age." HOW NECESSARY YET TODAY FOR GOD TO RESCUE US FROM THE MANY "EGYPTS" THAT ARE STILL ENSLAVING US. How necessary for God to remind us WHOSE WE ARE ... not his perfect children, but his faithful followers -- the ones who still trust him above ourselves for the assurance of love, mercy and shalom! God is forever faithful to us, even when we're less than perfect -- he will rescue us from the doubt and self-deception dumped upon us by the devil.

But our struggle not only centers upon WHOSE WE ARE -- we also do battle with WHO WE ARE. One of the games of my boyhood was called King of the Mountain. We would find a dirt hill near a construction site and then for hours we would climb, crawl, roll, rumble, and scramble to get to the top and yell: "King of the Mountain!" As I remember, the game involved a fair share of kicking, scratching, pushing, shoving, even biting -- it was a ruthless contest!

The devil would have us believe that this game is ours to play forever. "Forever and ever," says the devil, "you must reign as King of the Mountain!" So we scratch, we kick, we claw, we push, we shove, and we hit below the belt! This becomes the activity that so often defines WHO WE ARE! We want everyone to know that "I'm King of the Mountain!!"

The devil would have us believe this is our #1 priority -- TO STAY ON TOP! The devil's message is crystal clear: YOU MUST ALWAYS BE IN CONTROL! Never let your guard down! Never show your true feelings! Never cry! Get them, before they get you!! Is it any wonder that we have so much insecurity among our children today?? Is it any wonder that there are drug problems & drop outs and other forms of self-destructive behavior among our youth? What is the model of "the good life" that our children see all around them -- BE KING OF THE MOUNTAIN, OR BE NOTHING!! That's the message we are giving them -- if they're not on the top, they're nobodies! Is that truly the image of WHO WE ARE????

This past week Bill Sanders spoke to hundreds of our school kids in this area. Some would say his message was too simplistic for sophisticated parents. But maybe that's one of

our worst temptations -- we're trying to be too sophisticated, too complicated in our parenting. Well, for what it was worth, Sanders defined WHO WE ARE as parents in simple but profound terms: "TAKE TIME TO LOVE MORE AND LAUGH MORE WITH YOUR KIDS!" Love more ... and laugh more!

When you come right down to it -- isn't that WHO WE ARE? Didn't God create us to be the greatest LOVERS AND LAUGHERS on earth?? Tell me what animal God has made that is a better lover than you or me!! God has not created us to be King of the Mountain, even though some of us may aspire to that position. God has created us to be the GREATEST LOVERS AND LAUGHERS ON EARTH. Who are we? We are the people who aspire to the greatest example of love on earth, the love of Christ the King! Who are we?? We are the people of God who can laugh at ourselves even when we fall off the mountain because God has taught us how to live and love at the bottom, at the top, and in between. Who are we?? We are God's people who are not afraid to confess that sometimes we are broken, sometimes fearful, sometimes even greedy and lustful -- but always seeking God's renewing love. Who are we? We're the greatest lovers God has made on earth, because we're the only ones he has made! Not perfect lovers, but lovers who can laugh at ourselves even when we're not on the top! People who love and laugh like that cannot be deceived by any devil!!

But we need to know not only WHOSE WE ARE and WHO WE ARE -- we need to know WHY WE ARE!! For the devil delights in tempting us to forget our real reason for being here! There's a great story told of a NW Ohio farmer who insisted upon using his bulls to plow the field. His neighbor finally came over & said, "Why don't you use your oxen?" The farmer responded: "Don't want to use the oxen. Want to use the bulls!" The neighbor said, Well, why don't you use your horses? "Don't want to use the horses. Want to use the bulls. The neighbor finally said, "why don't you use that new fangled tractor that your son just bought for you? "Don't want to use a tractor. Want to use the bulls." "Well," said the neighbor, "Why are the bulls so impt?" "Don't want them bulls to think that life is just for romancing the cows!"

Our greatest temptation is to think that life is "just for romancing with Christ." The devil loves to deceive us into thinking that WE SHOULD WORK HARD FOR OURSELVES ... AND JUST PLAY AROUND WITH GOD. The devil consistently tempted Jesus to "take the easy way." Jesus, use your miracles for self-improvement -- "turn these stones into bread." Use you miracles for self-glory, Jesus -- "jump from the pinnacle of the temple!" Use you miracles for celebrity status, Jesus -- "the whole world will bow down and worship you." The devil continually sought to deceive Jesus that God's will can be achieved without suffering, without sacrifice, without serving anyone but yourself!!

The devil continues to deceive us in the same way: HE SAYS, JUST STRIVE FOR SUCCESS WITHOUT SUFFERING AND HAPPINESS WITHOUT STRUGGLE. The devil wants us to think that life has no surprises, no crosses, no trials, no tribulations -- all our problems can get the "quick fix" from God.

Well, God did not send Jesus into the world to promote a "quick fix" mentality for life's struggles. Jesus never took the easy way -- the road to painless success. Never once did Jesus perform a miracle in order to avoid personal suffering or pain. He only did miracles "for the sake of others!"

SO WHY ARE WE HERE? For one reason, and only one reason: To serve like our Lord. To remember that we always have the security of knowing WHOSE WE ARE. To be empowered by the Spirit of God to LOVE, TO LAUGH, TO CRY, TO CARE -- for that's WHO WE ARE. And in whatsoever we do, to remember we have been rescued and redeemed by the death of the world's greatest lover. And our ministry is like his -- one which never asks: "How easy will it be? but rather, "Will Christ be seen in what I do??" Yes - WHY ARE WE HERE?? Quite simply, to be faithful lovers like Christ, who seek to give the first fruits of God's love to others ... and even laugh and learn while we're doing it!!

AMEN.

LENT I
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
February 28, 1993
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"GIVE ME A BREAK!!"

"And Jesus was led up by the Spirit out in the wilderness
to be tempted by the devil." Matt. 4:1

The season of Lent is upon us -- it's the favorite season for all Christians during the church year (NOT!). And yet how tragic that we have had remembrances of this season from days gone by. It is a season we all desperately need. As I said on Wednesday night - every one of us needs a time for personal repentance; a time for personal inventory; a time for personal renunciation - to renounce our own obsession with self-possesion! There's not one of us in this room who has not at one time or another become TOO OBSESSED WITH HIMSELF/HERSELF. So on this first Sunday of Lent - the texts take us where we all need to go now and then ... out in the wilderness ... time away from the pressures and every-day problems that consume us ... time for a BREAK FROM BUSINESS AS USUAL. As I just read from the gospel: we're told that "Jesus was led away by the Spirit into the wilderness." He had just been baptized and was soon to begin his ministry on earth; he needed a BREAK before facing all the challenges ahead. He needed some time away to reflect upon the host of agendas that would soon confront his earthly ministry.

I hope we can all identify with this TIME AWAY in the wilderness. Either before we take on a new challenge or just after we've been through a taxing encounter -- we all yearn for SOME TIME AWAY. Each of us in his/her own way says, "GIVE ME A BREAK!" Jesus was yearning for that same BREAK -- that time away by himself to clear his mind and refresh his spirit before the struggles of ministry were upon him.

There's not a person here today who has not shared a similar desire. After putting in many taxing years in a highly responsible vocation, one of the first things we expect before taking a new job is to BE GIVEN A BREAK - TIME AWAY FOR RE-GROUPING AND GETTING A NEW SLANT ON THINGS. You'll note in my March COMMENTARY that the same is true for our congregation -- for several years we have almost taken on a new challenge every year ... and now's the time TO TAKE A BREAK! And I'm so grateful that Jeff, Sharon & Alexander will be able to get away this coming week just to re-group and clear their minds to some extent of the pain and tears of these last several months. We all know that when we don't GIVE OURSELVES A BREAK after a significant grief or painful struggle - then the grief and pain hangs on and lingers destructively into the future.

But there is also a false security in GIVING OURSELVES THESE BREAKS!! So often we think if we can just RUN AWAY into the wilderness, then we won't have to confront anymore pains or problems. I am always amazed by the number of people who

think if they just move far enough into the country, then they won't have any more hassles or heartaches. We have certainly seen this past week that even little towns like Tecumseh are visited by perversion and tragedy of the human spirit: a 17 yr old boy shooting his 13 yr old girlfriend while asleep in her bed. This tragedy graphically illustrates that we simply can't run away from temptation and evil. I remember a couple of years ago when Jeff, Debbie, Larry & I planned a BREAKAWAY to Chicago so that we could get AWAY FROM ALL THE PRESSURES OF THE PARISH! It was finally going to be a time to get our cups filled. But even in the wilderness of Chicago we soon learned that there were a lot of unresolved agendas: expectations of ministry that we had not yet totally clarified between us. So instead of coming back relaxed, refreshed & rejuvenated -- I came back still filled with tension and anxiety. The truth is - you can't run away from the struggles & squabbles of life. These difficulties must be faced, no matter what the terf.

So it is in our gospel for today that Jesus models this same confrontation for us. He is led into the wilderness with one agenda for himself: to have time to constitute himself for his ministry. But when he finally gets to that quiet place set apart - he is denied the chance for peaceful meditation. In fact, if you look at other gospel stories -- this happens many times to Jesus throughout his ministry: THERE'S ALWAYS SOME NEW DEMAND OR STRUGGLE WAITING TO CHALLENGE HIM. His break in the wilderness BECAME A PLACE OF STRUGGLE AGAINST TEMPTATION AND EVIL.

For me, that is a significant application of this temptation story for all of us. Unlike our Lord, one of our greatest temptations is to demand that God WILL GIVE US A BREAK FROM FAITHFULNESS AND RESPONSIBILITY. How many times have I heard older members say: "Well, I've done that so many times - let someone else do it now! Give me a break, God!!" But temptation is not only limited to congregational life! Far too many Americans, whether on welfare or abundantly wealthy, figure that the government should give them all kinds of BREAKS. Many marriages suffer from a BREAK AWAY MENTALITY, where partners say, "Give me a break so that I can mess around a little bit!" And which one of us haven't heard of people getting downright hostile because they didn't "get their 15-minute break" after working 3 or 4 hours. The values of faithfulness and responsibility are constantly compromised by the tempter today. We know he doesn't come around in a red suit with a pitch fork, but his spirit is always tempting us away from what we know is right. And we find ourselves ever-saying: "Give me a break for more play, more pleasure, & fun!

That reminds me of the story I once told of John Charles who finally came home from school with a better report card. But on the bottom were the teachers' remarks of great caution: "John Charles is a very bright and deeply capable student; however, I believe he spends too much time playing with the girls. I want you to know (as his parents) that I am working on a plan to BREAK him from this tempting habit." John

Charles' mother acknowledged the report card. But below her signature she wrote to the teacher: "Let me know if your plan works with John Charles; I'd like to try it on his father!"

The struggle to BREAK AWAY from our faithfulness to God, to family, to church, to those who love us - this is the ongoing struggle that never ends. We are baptized into Christ's body; and as soon as we come to awareness, we find ourselves tangling with temptation & dangers. The temptations often come in waves. Like Jesus, sometimes it may be a temptation to total security: to turn stones into bread - to make material things our gods. The next time, maybe a temptation to arrogance -- to defy God and gravity and make faith into a superstitious cult or a notion that our bodies are beyond mortality. And the next time it may be the temptation to worldly authority or power - having the earth's kingdoms at our feet - being totally in control. But whatever the specifics - it's always a TEMPTATION TO BREAK AWAY FROM GOD -- to compromise our faith and our belief in His Word!!

That's simply the fact of living in a broken world. Call it the devil; call it original sin; call it perversion; call it by whatever name you want to -- but there simply is NO TIME AWAY from temptation and struggle in this world. We cry out, "GIVE ME A BREAK!" Give me some "time off," Lord, where I no longer experience the challenge and conflict of temptation, sin and compromise. It's like the story of the NW Ohio farmer who insisted upon using his bulls to plow his field. His neighbor came to him and said: "Why don't you use your big oxen?" The farmer responded: "Don't want to use the oxen; got to use the bulls!" The neighbor went on, "Well, why not use those big draft horses?" The farmer again responded: "Don't want to use those draft horses; got to use the bulls." The neighbor finally said: "Well, why don't you use that new John Deere that your son just bought for you?" Again, the farmer said: "Can't use tractor; got to use the bulls!" The neighbor finally said: "Why are those bulls so important to you?" And farmer responded: "Don't want them bulls to think that life is just for romancing the cows!"

Our greatest temptation is to think that life is just for "romancing with Christ" -- for just taking the easy way - the worldly way without pain or sacrifice! Our gospel text today reminds us that faithful living is not such a ROMANTIC BREAKAWAY! But this text also reminds us that we need never fear -- for we never face threatening realities or temptations without the company of God and his people. In Jesus Christ, we not only see that evil is conquered -- but even the greatest evil, death itself, will not have the final sting! There is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of Christ!

I am sure that there were many times in the last four months when Jeff and Sharon cried out to God, "GIVE US A BREAK, LORD! TAKE AWAY THIS TERRIBLE EVIL OF LOSING OUR SECOND CHILD SO SOON. MAKE IT EASY FOR US. GIVE US A

physical miracle so that we won't have to face any spiritual pain! But just as God said to his Son - he also shares with Jeff & Sharon & each of us: "My dearly beloved, you will not be free of suffering and heartache in this world. But I will not leave you alone in the wilderness to battle this tragedy all by yourselves. I will be with you ... through sacrament and the support of my earthly body - there will be comfort for you ... I will give you the strength to see a new day. Do not be tempted to RUN AWAY; remain faithful to the very end!

And so through this congregation, its staff, the people of Gesu R. Cath Church, many clergy in Toledo, through family and friends, through a whole multitude of angelic hosts -- the Lord of life did not leave Jeff and Sharon to stand alone in their pain and grief in the wilderness. But he reminds them even as they are planning to break away for Florida -- there will be moments of struggle and temptation ahead. There will be times when they will be tempted toward self-pity - feeling that either their God or their family or their congregations or their friends are letting them down! But remember, I am the Lord your God ... a God who never lets anyone down, but only lifts you up!! Just as I have lifted up my Son, Jesus Christ, and now your son, Andrew Zachary, I will continue to lift you up through the power of my forgiving grace and the peace which surpasses human understanding.

So, let us take a BREAK THIS LENTEN SEASON. In fact, let us remember that this is the very reason for our being here every season of the church year. For God our Father desires to give us only ONE THING -- TO GIVE US A BREAK - NAMELY, TO GIVE US A BREAK FROM ANY POWER WHICH SEEKS TO TEAR US DOWN! He urges us not to be tempted to run away from struggles and pain, but to address them to Him and to each other. And when we do that, then we will know the consolation of his peace ... for then we will find that the evil one will have left us, and suddenly HIS HOLY angels will be coming and waiting upon us.

AMEN.

LENT I (Rev87)
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor
February 20, 1994

"D E S E R T T E S T I N G S"

"After Jesus' baptism, the Spirit immediately drove him into the desert (wilderness). He was in the desert forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts;

Mark 1:12-13

What a bountiful blessing to be a baptized and beloved son or daughter of God. And what a bountiful blessing to be called to be a disciple in Confirmation. And as adults, what a bountiful blessing to know that God himself has decided to use you and me as his servants. And then for a lifetime, what a bountiful blessing to be in communion with Jesus Christ in a mouth-to-ear & hand-to-mouth relationship. And then until death, what a bountiful blessing to have Him feed us with what he asks us serve others. What a bountiful blessing TO NEVER KNOW SEPARATION FROM GOD!!

But it means so much more than the abundance that we share here. To be a disciple ... is still to be very human. And the real test of our human discipleship IS NOT HOW WE HANDLE THE BOUNTIFUL BENEFITS THAT GOD BESTOWS UPON US IN THE SANCTUARY. (The real test for Sasha Mandross is not today at her baptism, but the hundreds of times that she will be tested by her boyfriends, girlfriends, and adult friends to violate and even negate the Will of God.) Yes, the real test is not in this sanctuary - but when you and I are standing alone in the darkness of desertion ... when we are pressed against the shattering structures of illness and grief ... when we are languishing in the pit of despair or doubt ... when we have to deal with our identity ... our burnout ... our marriages ... our disobedient kids! The real test is to KEEP ON GOING FOR GOD'S GOLD even when the scores in this world don't even GIVE US A CHANCE TO GET NEAR A BRONZE!

The measure of any disciple is NOT how you and I appear in the bountiful blessings of the sanctuary ... with our Sunday smiles, our sanctuary stylishness, and our churchly charm. The real test is how do we handle the dry places ... the empty places ... the lonely places ... the desert places. That's the terrain of today's texts: that place in ancient Israel which broiled under searing-sun, which was scorched by a sand-blasting wind, and which was most inhabited by lizards, scorpions and vultures. That's where God's call takes us today -- out of the security of Sunday's sanctuary, and into the hot and rough and dry places of Monday's world. And God asks us: HOW DO YOU LIKE MY CALL OF COMPASSION & FORGIVENESS WHEN FACED WITH A DESERT TESTING?

Yes, the territory of today's texts reminds us that all faithful disciples ... in fact every human being has to come to grips with his or her DESERT TESTINGS. As we see in the first text, Abraham was tested ... even unfairly tested: WOULD HE CHOOSE FAITHFULNESS TO GOD OR SAVING HIS OWN FLESH & BLOOD?

St. Paul in Rome was daily subjected to the power of persecution meted out to his friends simply because of their faithfulness to God. Under that "desert testing," what would his message finally proclaim: THAT WE ARE SEPARATED FROM GOD BY THE POWERS AND PRINCIPALITIES OF THIS WORLD?? Well, we know what he finally proclaimed: "that there is nothing in all creation which will separate us from the love of God in Christ our Lord."

Yes, God takes us into the desert (the wilderness) today because that is always one of his most significant seminaries - the desert is always his true testing and training grounds. Whenever God really gets ready to use a person to serve him -- he takes them into the desert!! Is it any wonder that Mark and all the gospel writers say this same thing: "And Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert." God was getting ready to really use him. Scripture is filled with desert testing & training. Abraham at Moriah; Elijah at Horeb; Ezekiel at Chebar; John at Patmos; Paul in Arabia; Jesus at Calvary. God always uses the wilderness. Martin Luther at Wittenberg and Worms; Bonhoeffer in a Nazi Camp; Martin Luther King in a Birmingham jail. And today in Lillehammer - God was testing the likes of a Dan Jansen to see if he would give up after so many times of failure ... testing the likes of Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding: to see if after a brutal attack in Detroit, there is still compassion in Hamar. Yes, whenever God gets ready to fashion and mold and shape a woman or man for his ultimate purpose -- he takes them away from the ground of pleasure. And he leads them into the desert ... he challenges them to live by faithfulness to Him rather than by loyalty to the narcissism of this world. And anyone who has ever had to make the choice between God's Gold and the world's wonderlust - knows the difficulty of DESERT TESTINGS!

So in today's temptation stories -- there is a great word of caution from God. He says, "Be careful if you want to be used MIGHTILY BY ME! If you want to be used powerfully and dare to ask for it -- look out, your DESERT TESTING will soon be etched into my calendar. For that is where I teach true and everlasting discipleship. It's in the WILDERNESS ... in the desert that I teach what a disciple ... a servant ... a messenger ... a faithful follower has to know. It's in the desert where I teach my most profound truths about BEING A DISCIPLE - namely, self-denial, patience & loyalty."

It's in the desert where God teaches you and me the real meaning of SELF-DENIAL. A whole lot of us want to be used by God, but we don't want any part of self-denial. There's a new school of prophets in this world teaching that religion should be ALL GLORY and NO SACRIFICE! This school of thought says, "just cater to anything the children want," 'children' meaning people from nursery age to old age. This "church growth" mentality only has room for the glorious performances of Easter Sundays; there's no room in this religious movement for Ash Wednesdays, Lenten Studies, or Good Fridays. This form of Christianity is "Xanity without the Cross." It's the kind of Xanity that devils thrive upon - because it is the glory of greed & materialism with the facade of faith ... a Xanity without the call of "taking up the cross and following Him"

But as we have seen and learned so well from the Olympic athletes - if you really want to GO FOR THE GOLD, then you must deny all the fake offers of instant gratification that tempt you along the way. For as these athletes have shown - as they deny the superficial self, the greater self evolves. As they give self away (through hours and hours of training) they discover a deeper & truer self. As they deny their own egotistical self, then their most benevolent self abounds. This is the way of the kingdom. And it's in the desert of training and testing (whether for Lillehammer or for Life) that God teaches the true meaning of self-denial.

Secondly, it's in the desert that God teaches PATIENCE. Nobody wants to languish in the desert, but it's in that wilderness that God teaches patience. "Waiting for what?" "Waiting on Him!" That's what he teaches! Just as he taught Dan Jansen to WAIT AND KEEP FAITHFUL, so he teaches you & me.

I thank God that when I began to taste the success of Parish Ministry that God took me into the desert to learn patience. I had just left my Associate pastorate in Milwaukee ... and I was now off to Troy, Michigan to be "in charge." At last, I was going to be the CEO, the empowered pastor! This congregation had a history of sluggishness -- only ten years old in a city that was bursting with development, yet the cong. was slowly decaying. But God was now calling me; God was asking me to be part of his answer for Troy, Michigan.

Attendance in Troy had been averaging 25-35 a Sunday. I said to myself: "Aha, I'm going to see it double or triple in a month or two. Well, I had two introductory Sundays. Both days attendance swelled to over a hundred. I thought, "Aha, it's happening!" But about the third week, it was back down to 30 or 35. And it stayed that way for the fourth week. And it was dry again on the fifth week; and dry again the sixth week. And it stayed dry - very dry for a very long time.

Dear friends, it stayed dry for several months. Finally Christmas came ...and that Christmas Eve there were 215 worshippers in that little sanctuary! We were prepared for a hundred, and God blessed us with 215! And although I did not hear a voice from heaven, God still spoke to me. He said, "Peter, I wanted you to learn at the start of this ministry, that you're not in charge; I'm in control here. The power is not in your warm personality, not in your prophetic preaching -- but I'm the power and I'm the source of new life in Troy. Learn to wait on me; learn to worship me; learn to listen to me ... and I will bless you and your people!!" Like me, many Assoc. Pastors are led out into the desert to have one of those learning experiences; one of these days Pastor Silleck will encounter one of those same wilderness challenges of aloneness with God: no staff, no large facility, no big endowment to count on -- just all alone WAITING FOR GOD'S PURPOSE TO BE ACHIEVED. Because in the desert, God teaches the meaning of WAITING ON HIM AND HIS PURPOSES!

Finally, in the desert, God's gives us one of His greatest attributes - the latitude of time!! When we are not in the desert, we tend to relegate God to wherever or whenever we can "fit him in!" When everything is going beautifully, it's hard for God to get on our calendars ... on our agendas, in our appointment books. We get busy in our jobs ... in our clubs ... in the lives of our children - and God is often the first one to go! Even in the business of our church work, sometimes it becomes difficult for God to have any quality time with us. But when we are led out into the desert, then all of a sudden "the altar of God" comes back into focus -- because there's nothing else to see. Sometimes only in the desert can God get our full attention; sometimes only in our most challenging and testing moments can God finally teach us the true value of life. When everything's going well, then we know it all! But when life crowds in ... when life squeezes ... when life gets tight and tough and terrible -- then finally God gets some time. We're finally listening and God can finally speak! In the desert, God finally HAS TIME to teach us ... and season us ... and lead us to repentance; God finally has time for us to find ourselves.

Maybe that's why that old Samaritan story as told by the black preacher still sums it up better than you or I could tell it. We all know how the boy left home and spent all of his substance on riotous living. And the father wanted the boy back home, so he sent his friend out there to find him. And the friend found him out there living it up and partying, and said to the son: "Your father sent me, and wants me to bring you back home!" And the son said, "And what's your name, Sir?" "My name is HOPE. Your father wants you to know that he still has HOPE for you." And the son said, "Mr. Hope, I'm glad you came; now go back home and tell my father that he's wasting his time."

But because the father loved him mightily, he sent a second friend whose name was LOVE. Love said to the son, "I've been sent by your Father to bring you back home; your father wants you to know that he still loves you ... very much!" And the son said, "I'm glad my father still loves me, but you go back and tell him EVEN LOVE can't bring me home!"

Love got back, and the father sent a third friend and said, "Go get my boy." So this friend found the son partying and carrying on and said: "I've come to bring you home." And the son asked, "What's your name?" And the friend said, "I'm not going to tell you; just come with me." And the boy said, "I'm not coming back home." And the 3rd friend answered, "O.K., if that's the way you want it -- then I'll just stay here with you AND REMAIN LOYAL until you're ready."

And wherever the boy went, whenever he looked up, there was this LOYAL 3rd friend. The son went from party to party, and this LOYAL friend was right there with him. And the boy yelled, "why don't you go back home! Haven't you learned, I'm not coming!" And the friend said, "That's o.k., I'm just going to keep on LOYALLY walking with you."

And soon the son found himself without a job; and the father's friend was right there with him. And then he was without money; and the father's friend was right at his side. And then the boy found himself in a pig pen, and the father's friend was RIGHT IN THE MUCK with him. Finally we're told that the boy came to his senses, and he looked at the father's friend and said: O.K., you won! I'll go home - but first tell me your name!" And the friend said, "My name is THE LOYALTY OF TIME! And I want you to know that THE LOYALTY OF TIME ALWAYS brings you home to your father!"

In the desert, God finally uses TIME to bring us to our senses! And in the desert, we finally realize with THE LOYALTY OF TIME what and who really matter in our lives! That's why we give EXTRA TIME & SIGNICANT ENERGY & INSIGHT to our faith during the Lenten Study at Hope: it's a time to sacrifice our own agendas so that we might better learn the LOYALTY & PATIENCE OF GOD.

Yes, no matter how great we may think we are ... no matter how many degrees or honors we may have ... no matter what our net worth may be ... no matter how glossy our lives have become -- no matter how many "golds" we have won -- not one of us can live life without the reality of DESERT TESTINGS! And what God says to us, just as he said to Abraham and Moses and Elijah and Jesus and Martin Luther King and Dan Jansen and Brian Boitano and a multitude of others who have felt all alone and tested by the dryness of the desert: "Don't give up ... don't quit ... don't throw away your dreams of making this a better world! Just dig into my grace and forgiving love! And learn from my example of compassion and courage! Accept this cross for now, because you will grow from it and one day you will be resurrected from it. For I will never forsake you to die in the desert, "for there is nothing in all creation which will separate you from my love in Christ our Lord.

AMEN.

Lent I
Glenwood Lutheran & Sunset House
March 1, 1998
Peter R. Martyn, Presiding Pastor & Chaplain

“MORE THAN A PRIVATE AFFAIR!”

“If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Romans 10:9

How many of you have ever heard the Ole and Lena stories? Well, if you're married to a Norwegian, you will certainly know a few Ole & Lena stories. So - I brought one to share with all of you today. Lena says to Ole -- she says: “Ole, now what's the matter with you ... you never tell me you love me anymore.” And Ole says to Lena: “Now Lena ... you're exaggerating again. I told you I loved you on the day that we got married, right?!? Well, if I change my mind -- I'll let you know then, o.k.?”

Regretably -- there are lots of people (especially married couples) who are much like Ole to Lena. They have forgotten how to faithfully say to the other: “I love you.” So, just so that I don't leave here today or any other time fearing that I'll be accused of forgetting-- let me say it again: “I love you ... and so does God the Father!” But as we all know -- once we say those words, then we have to back them up with consistent & meaningful actions. And there's nothing more precious than to hear those words when suffering from a tired and empty spirit. But on the contrary -- there's nothing more hurtful than to hear those words from someone and then be treated as if they had never been said.

Well - my intent today is not to use the pulpit as a medium for marriage therapy. Yet today's texts relate to the whole issue of making salvation (God's love and mercy) **MORE THAN A PRIVATE AFFAIR!** God calls us to profess with our lips and our lives. And there's a great temptation among Christians -- and especially Lutherans -- to make the profession and demonstration of their faith a very **PRIVATE AFFAIR** -- something that may be felt, but certainly not seen or heard by God or anyone else! And so St. Paul graphically clarifies that faithfulness to God is a two dimension proposition: **BELIEF & PROFESSION:** *“If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”*

Notice here two important faith matters that may be overlooked. First, “salvation” (or oneness with God) is not based upon perfection of the law or morality, but upon conviction of the heart & profession with the lips. That's why even the worst violators of the commandments still have **HOPE** with God -- they can always have a change of heart and profess the same. Likewise -- notice that Paul doesn't say if you believe every word of the Bible “you will be saved;” he says “if you believe and profess the risen Lord you will be saved.” There are a lot of fundamentalist Christians running around saying that we are “saved by believing in the Bible.” Well - Paul makes crystal clear our faith is in a risen Lord -- not a sacred book that we can make into an idol on the coffee table.

And so we are reminded today -- that our hearts are changed in the same way -- "by what the risen Lord says" ... not simply by all the words of a sacred book. Through Jesus Christ - God continues to tell us that no matter how far we drift from him -- he loves and forgives us. And that Word of the Lord comes from sacraments, from worship moments, from preacher's sermons, from intimate moments of care with family or friends, from healing moments; all of these and others become the Lord's way of sharing his love with us. All these expressions have but one purpose: TO CHANGE OUR HEARTS -- to get us to affirm that only God and God alone in Jesus Christ is our Savior.

No matter how troubled, traumatized or full of tribulation our lives may become -- God never gives up on us. He always seeks to rescue us & change our hearts. As one preacher says, "God is forever throwing out the life preserver to every drowning soul. But that life preserver won't help the drowning victim if he/she doesn't grab on." There comes a time when what we know on the inside must be expressed with conviction on the outside. Only then can it have power to help others. Only when Ole daily shares visible expressions of love with Lena will their relationship have the saving power of God to make it survive. It must be MORE THAN A PRIVATE AFFAIR of the heart.

Or said differently - God keeps on expressing his love for us in order to strengthen us, not weaken us. God's love is not some kind of mushy thing that gives us shakey knees or makes us weak & romantic. His love seeks to strengthen us to work against the foes that seek to defeat us in this world. It reminds me of the story of the NW Ohio farmer who insisted on using his bulls to plow his fields. **** His neighbor came to him and said: "Why don't you use the oxen to help??" The farmer responded: "Can't use the oxen; got to use the bulls!" The neighbor responded: "Well, why not try those big draft horses? The farmer retorted: "Can't use the draft horses; got to use the bulls!" Finally the neighbor said: "Look, why don't you just use that new John Deere tractor that your son bought you?" Again, the farmer answered: "Can't use that John Deere; got to use the bulls!" At which point the neighbor asked: "Why are those bulls so important to you?" And the farmer responded: "Don't want them bulls to think that life is just for romancing the cows!!"

There is a great temptation among many Christians to make their faith a private, romantic thing between them and Jesus. Many Christians have a wonderful belief in their hearts that Jesus was raised from the dead -- but that knowledge hasn't made them work harder ... hasn't caused them to be more consecrated in their daily lives in professing or showing a faithful spirit. Too many Christians run around talking about "being saved" but do nothing for others to share "the risen life" of Christ's saving power. IN short - many grab the Lord's life preserver for themselves, but do not share it with anyone else in danger of drowning. There are a lot of Titanic Christians in our world -- people with hearts concerned only with self-preservation & personal security.

And that's where today's gospel connects with St. Paul's message. The ploy of the devil or the evil one or whatever you call it is this: **TO MAKE FAITH IN GOD ONLY A PRIVATE THING** -- a temptation to be only concerned about "getting enough bread for me" ... "about securing my own power or status, and the heck with everyone else" ... esp. those who are distinctly different from me in color, nationality or economics. Nothing could be more contrary to the spirit of the risen Christ given to us in Holy Baptism. Christ's spirit seeks to change our hearts -- to make us more like God, where our mission is not one of merely serving self ... but being dedicated to serving others. God calls us every Sunday to leave this safe place with our hearts changed **SO THAT OUR LIPS AND LIVES WILL PROFESS THE ENERGETIC POWER OF HIS MERCY FOR OTHERS.**

When we see or hear someone tempted to racism or prejudice -- we are to profess that this is not the spirit of the living Christ. When we are tempted by anyone to make greed & material things more powerful than spiritual sacrifices -- then we are to profess with our lips and lives that this is not the lifestyle of our risen Lord. When we are tempted by our culture and peer group to make worship of Jesus Christ just one of many other options on the Sabbath -- then we are to profess with our lips and our lives to those disciples of the devil: *"Worship the Lord you God and serve only him!!"*

Every day in this world is a day when the temptor seeks to make **A LIVING FAITH** into little **MORE THAN A HIDDEN PRIVATE AFFAIR** of the heart. Is it any wonder that we have so much prejudice, violence, homelessness, addiction, injustice and immorality in our culture?? Too many Christians have made their faith a private affair of the heart -- they are no longer professing with their lips what they believe in their hearts. St. Paul says on this first Sunday of Lent -- *"if you're looking for something to 'give up during Lent' -- give up a faith which believes in a risen Lord but doesn't live by it."* Unlike Ole -- when you make a promise to love God or anyone else -- let your lips and your life daily show that your faith is **More Than a Private Affair.**

Amen.

Lent I (February 17, 2002)
First English Lutheran Church, Toledo
Peter R. Martyn, Part-time Interim Pastor

“DESERT TIME”

*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert (wilderness) to be tempted by the devil.
Mathew 4:1 (special thanks to Dr. John Bryant for his talk & inspiration).*

Every week, we sit in this beautiful sanctuary BOUNTIFULLY BLESSED. Yet even while we are being blessed, we are also being tested. And the real test of discipleship is NOT how we handle God’s bountiful blessings. The real test is when you and I are standing alone in the darkness of desertion ... when we’re shattered by illness & grief ... when we have to deal with burnout or some other major disappointment. The real test is what I’m calling today DESERT TIME.

From Genesis to Revelation, God’s message is the same: the real measure of any disciple is NOT how you and I appear in the bountiful blessings of our Sunday sanctuaries. The real measure is how we handle the dry places ... the empty places ... the lonely places ... the desert places. The real question is: HOW DOES God’s call feel when we’re dealing with desert time?

Today’s texts remind us that all faithful disciples must come to grips with Desert Time. And today’s gospel makes crystal clear that before Jesus could begin his ministry – he had to have some Desert Time. Because the DESERT has always been one of God’s supreme seminaries. God uses the DESERT as the training grounds for true discipleship. That’s why all of the gospels offer this same testimony about Jesus: “*And Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert.*” God was getting ready to really use Jesus. Scripture is filled with desert training: *Elijah at Horeb; Ezekial at Chebar; John at Patmos; Paul in Arabia; Martin Luther at Worms; Bonhoeffer in a Nazi Prison Camp; Martin Luther King in a Birmingham jail; Jesus at Calvary!* God always uses the desert ... the dry, the rough, the tough places to get us ready for His mission.

So my friends at 1st English – be careful and vigilant. GOD HAS PUT YOU ON HIS CALENDAR of Desert Time ... his “testing time.” It’s God’s time when he tests you to see if you really are what you profess to be. Interims are always part of God’s Desert Time. They are the times when God really wants to see the real essence of a congregation’s trust. And there are three characteristics of testing during every period of DESERT TIME.

First, when God takes you into the desert he’s checking to see if you know the real meaning of SELF- DENIAL. We all want God to use us ... just so long as we don’t have to DENY OURSELVES. But God has a different utility plan. The only way that He ever helps anyone become a disciple is to teach that person THE WAY OF THE CROSS. Only as we give self away do we discover the true self; only as we deny the egotistical self can the benevolent self abound.

DESERT TIME is one of the greatest times of discipleship because we finally learn the true meaning of SELF-DENIAL.

Secondly, Desert Time teaches PATIENCE. Nobody wants to languish in the desert, but only in the desert can God teach patience. Only when you and I don't have everything at our finger tips do we finally realize we **HAVE TO WAIT ... TO BE PATIENT.** Finally in the desert God teaches you and me to "let go, and let Him take control." God taught me that experience more than 25 years ago in Troy, MI. In 1974, I went off to Troy, MI to be in charge of a parish – no longer an Associate. The congregation had a history of sluggishness; only ten years old and already declining in the fastest growing suburb of Detroit. But impatient Peter – he would turn things around!!

Attendance was averaging 35-45 per Sunday. I thought, "We'll get this to double in no time!" Well, I had two honeymoon Sundays; both Sundays we swelled to over 80. And I thought, "Wow, it's happening already!" But the third week it was back down to 35; and it stayed there the fourth week; and it was dry the fifth week; the sixth, etc. It stayed dry for several months!

Then the first Christmas Eve came. We had prepared for around 100; 215 showed up in a sanctuary that sat only 150. And that night, although I did not hear the voice directly, God spoke to me saying: "Peter, I wanted you to learn that you're not in charge here – I'm in control! The power of this church is not in your personality, your charm, your prophetic preaching, or anything else you do. I am the power & presence of new life in Troy, MI. So learn to wait for me ... learn to worship me ... learn to let me lead, then I will bless you." God is saying the same thing to 1st English today ... and for all her days. "Learn to let me lead ... give me the control ... and you will be blessed! But be patient, and don't destroy my spirit with pettiness!" Yes, we learn the meaning of patience in the desert.

Finally, in the desert – God gets ENOUGH TIME. When you and I are NOT in the desert, we tend to relegate God to the back burner. When everything is going great – it's hard for God to get priority on our agendas. Everything else gets on the calendar ... except time to fulfill God's purpose! So now & then, God needs to take us out into the desert; and there we again find TIME for God. Finally – in the desert God gets TIME to TEACH US, TO SEASON US, TO TURN US AROUND (repent) and take a new look at Him.

Dr. John Bryant tells a great "African-American-Fix-It-Story" to illustrate this point. It's the parable of the Good Samaritan with the "sanctified imagination" of a black preacher. We all know the real version – how the boy left home and spent all his money on riotous living. Well, Bryant's ABRIDGED EDITION goes like this. The father wanted the boy back home, so he sent his friend out to find him. And the friend found the boy partying it up and said, "Your father sent me, and he wants me to bring you back home." And the boy said, "And what's your name?" "My name is HOPE." And your father wants you to know that he still has "hope" for you. And the boy said, "Mr. Hope, I'm glad you came; now go home and tell my father he's wasting his time."

Yet out of love, the father sent a second friend whose name was LOVE. And "love" said to the boy, "I've been sent by your father to bring you back home;

your father wants you to know that he still loves you.” And the boy said, “I’m glad my father still loves me, but go back home and tell him I’m not coming home even for love.”

Love went back home, and the father sent a third friend. This friend found the son partying and carrying on and said, “I’ve come to bring you home!” And the son responded, “And what’s your name?” And the friend answered, “I’m not telling you; just come home w/me.” And the boy said, “I’m not coming home!” And the third friend said, “O.K., if that’s the way you want it, then I’ll just stay here with you until you’re ready to come.” So wherever the boy went – there was his father’s friend. The son went from party to party ... and there was his father’s friend. And the boy yelled, “Why don’t you go back home? I told you, I’m not coming with you!” And the friend said, “That’s o.k., I’m just going to keep waiting and walking with you!”

Soon the son found himself without a job. And the father’s friend was there with him. Then the son was without money. And the father’s friend was with him. Then the boy found himself in a pigpen. And the father’s friend was there with him. And finally, the boy came to his senses, and he looked at his father’s friend and said: “O.K., you win. I’ll go home! Now tell me your name!” And the friend said: “My name is TIME! And I want you to know that TIME is bringing you back home ... because God’s has all the TIME in the world to bring you back home!” *** (Pause) It’s only in the desert that God finally has the TIME to bring us to our senses. In the desert, we finally TAKE THE TIME to get to know what really matters ... and what God really wants from us.

Yes, no matter how great we think we are ... no matter how many degrees or how much status we have in this world ... NONE OF US will make it through life without DESERT TIME. But what God says to us in that time ... just as He said to Moses, to Abraham, to Paul, to Jesus: “Don’t give up just because you’re in the desert ... don’t lose faith in me when times get tough. Instead, dig in and make the best of that bad time. Learn from it. Let it season you. But don’t let it throw you because I have not forsaken you or left you alone!”

Because the same God who may lead us into the desert or allow us to go there ... that same God will always lead us out. That was the experience of Moses and Paul and Martin Luther and many others. Most importantly, that was the life of Jesus Christ. The same God who led Jesus to Calvary is the same God that led him out of an empty tomb. God never leaves anyone in the Desert! And when he brings us out – we will be better than when we went in. We will be stronger disciples because of our DESERT TIME. So let this time in the desert better teach you God’s ways of self-denial and patience – you will be greater disciples for it!

Amen.

*Lent III
First English Lutheran, Toledo
March 3, 2002
Peter R. Martyn, Part-time Interim*

MORE THAN A LIP QUENCHER!

*Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."
John 4:13-14*

And it came to pass that two young fleas fell in love. And after a period of courtship, they married and settled down. They found a large, good-natured and inactive dog for a home. Theirs was the ideal life: food, shelter and heat were provided – at no charge.

There was a housing unit in every wrinkle. Life was sweet and easy. All they did was eat, sleep and multiply. Freedom from want and fear had been attained – they and their numerous offspring enjoyed “the good life.”

But the old dog, sore and unappreciated, soon grew weak and weary. Unable to any longer support the hungry and multiplying population, he finally staggered off into the woods and died.

Anger reigned among the fleas. They held meetings protesting how the economic system had let them down. They even talked of suing the old dog for lack of support. But the panicky parasites had no case. Many perished on the spot. Others, bitter in spirit, trudged off into the cruel world and died by the roadside. The rest sought refuge with other dogs – only to be frustrated when none showed up.

So goes the fable of the fleas. It illustrates the way many have chosen to live – as parasites of the creation. Like the fleas, many people put their ultimate trust in single dogs of creation.

The gospel today confronts us with a theme similar to the fable of the fleas. Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman at a well. Contrary to pious Jewish tradition, he asks her to draw him a drink from the well. On the surface this appears to be no more significant than an exchange we might have at a supermarket. But not so for Jesus. He perceived in this woman a yearning for a deeper meaning in life. She was troubled and mixed-up ... and here was an opportunity to minister to her deeper needs.

So Jesus focuses upon a common yet important symbol between them – water. Water was a need they both had. In a land with a great scarcity of water, it

was a symbol that represented survival itself. But Jesus wanted her to see that water was for her what a dog is for a flea – only a temporary source of gratification. Water alone would not quench the real locus of her thirst.

That was the whole folly of her life. She had been trying to quench the thirst of her soul with nothing more than lip-quencherers. She had gone through five different husbands and was now working on a sixth. All this variety in partners had not led her to any real gratification. Jesus knew it and so did she. She also had been told that if she worshipped God in Jerusalem she would finally find satisfaction. But Jesus quickly pointed out – the geographical place of worship is not the answer to the thirst of the soul.

Essentially, Jesus was telling her (and each of us) that the real thirst of our lives will not be quenched by any earthly well – whether a water well, or religious shrine, or many partners or whatever. None of these reservoirs run deep enough. All of these only satisfy our superficial thirst. They serve as lip quencherers, but they will not fulfill the longing of our hearts.

So Jesus says, “Everyone who drinks of this water, will thirst again.” His message is quite simple: don’t expect ultimate security from dying dogs. The security of a dog’s fur, like all other earthly trappings, is here today and gone tomorrow. And yet as true as we all know this to be – the powers and pressures of our society continue to urge us to follow the Fable of the Fleas.

Whether it’s the food or fashion industry or whatever – we’re told that if we use this product or that one we will finally find ultimate gratification. When it comes to investing, we’re told “when E.F. Hutton talks, everyone listens.” Soon we will be besieged by Olympian endorsements that will claim to make us super champions. And of course American Express has long told us “never to leave home without it” because you can’t survive without their plastic.

Amazing isn’t it!?! The social pressures around us have always tried to make the superficial into the significant. Is it any wonder that Jesus was taking a stab at the Samaritan woman ... and all of us as well. He wants us to treasure more in life than the fable of the flea – to live more than a parasitic existence.

He wants us to take hold of the greatest gift that God has ever given – the glory of the cross ... Christ’s assurance of salvation. This is the only perfect expression of a well of life that never runs dry. This is the only water that gushes from everlasting to everlasting. In Jesus Christ, God goes beyond offering a mere lip quencher. God’s love in Jesus Christ gets to the very heart of every human being – our thirst for everlasting acceptance and forgiveness.

It was that very same thing that the woman from Samaria was looking for – a

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relationship of love that went deeper than the mere externals of life. She needed a relationship that would provide for more than her superficial thirst – she needed someone who loved her totally and completely ... regardless of the misdirection or mistakes of her past.

In Jesus Christ, God offered her that person. In Jesus Christ, God offers each of us that same person. In Jesus Christ, God offers us a living well that never dries up – a living and forgiving relationship that will never die!

In Jesus Christ, our thirst for acceptance, compassion and forgiveness is finally quenched. And so today, he challenges each of us to share his same spirit with others ... to become deep-seated wells of acceptance, compassion and forgiveness for one another.

Amen.