

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
February 22, 2015**

It's Never Easy

Hymns: "Lamb of God" – 98 (vv. 1-4) –
121 (vv. 1-4) – Closing: 98 (vv. 5,6)

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

¹² At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, ¹³ and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. Mark 1:12-13

The little boy had been watching for some time now, and he was sure that he was ready. In fact, all of his observation had him brimming with confidence that what he was about to undertake would actually be quite easy. In the driveway, he had watched as his older brother and sister pedaled in circles for hours. At the park, he had seen numerous people gliding down paths. Through the front window, he even saw the paperboy riding with bags around the handle bars. So when the day finally came for this boy to saddle his bike and ride on his own, he made the assumption that it would be easy. Of course, it didn't take long for reality to crush that assumption. After a few wobbly falls, a scraped knee and elbow, and a lesson in humility, the boy learned that it's never as easy as it looks.

It's a common mistake, isn't it; assuming that things will be easy, only to painfully learn that in life, it's rarely as easy as it seems?

Have you ever made that mistake in your Christian life – assuming that it's going to be easy? More specifically, have you ever held that thought when it comes to battling against temptation? All too often, I sense that Christians have this feeling that resisting temptation is something that should come easy. Perhaps we even sometimes start to think that as good

Christian people, we should almost be above temptation; that we shouldn't struggle with the sins that we so often do. And then, when we are tempted, when we do struggle, what is the result? We become ashamed and discouraged. It's why we so often introduce our confessions of sin with phrases like "I'm so embarrassed to be admitting this, but..." Or "I can't believe I would do this, but..."

Why do we use phrases like that? It's really pride, isn't it? Pride tells me that it should be easy, even natural, to live a good life. Pride tells me that it shouldn't be that hard to fight off the devil. Pride keeps me from being honest about how truly difficult it is to fight the flood of temptations that come into my life on a daily basis. Pride keeps me from acknowledging my struggles and asking for help. Pride keeps me from admitting that it's never easy.

Of course, the Bible leads us to a much different admission. And this first Sunday of Lent is a reminder for us. Lent is for sinners whose lives are full of temptation. Lent is for sinners who struggle with temptation. Lent is for sinners who know that it is never easy to persevere against temptation.

The beginning of Jesus' public ministry shows us why temptation is never easy. Every year, the Gospel for the first Sunday in Lent takes us to the same story from Jesus' life – his temptation by the devil. And as we look this year at Mark's account of the temptation, perhaps you're wondering where all the details are. Where's the sneaky push for a hungry Jesus to turn rocks into bread? Where's the offer of power and control from the highest mountain? Where are Jesus' perfect replies that so quickly shut each of Satan's temptations down? In Mark, we seem to be missing the details that are given in Matthew and Luke which make the story of The Temptation of Christ so memorable. Yet, through Mark's succinct words – these two short verses - we are given a stark picture of Jesus' temptation that shows us some important truths about our own battle against temptation.

Mark begins his account of Jesus' temptation with striking words, "At once." Those words

send us searching for what took place before this. In Mark 1:9-11, we were told about Jesus' baptism, which marked the beginning of Jesus' public work. What we see is that as soon as his work began, as soon as God had said, "Now is the time to carry out the work," Jesus was shown that it was not going to be easy. At once, the arduous work began.

At once, he was "sent out into the desert," Mark tells us. The desert is a barren place; uninhabited, lonely, forsaken, with no place to find shelter or help. With those brief words, Mark gives a clear picture; Jesus would be alone for this showdown in his work as the Savior. And then Mark gives us another detail. "He was in the desert forty days." For forty days, he would be called to endure.

Mark names his opponent: "he was tempted by Satan." The one who came against Jesus, who would test and tempt him, who would make his work as difficult as possible was the one whose very name means "Adversary" and "Opponent." Make no mistake, this wasn't a cute back-and-forth of cat and mouse; this battle was arduous and long. Jesus was fighting this battle as the substitute for all mankind, and both Satan and Jesus knew the stakes. For forty days, Jesus was in a place that was not safe, he was in a place reserved for wild animals, he was in a place where Satan came after him constantly in the most tempting of ways. There was nothing easy for Jesus as he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness.

In the same way that Satan came after Jesus, in a place where he was alone, for a time that required endurance, with temptations that were not easy to endure, so he comes after us. As we look at the temptation of Jesus, we can identify some of the tactics that Satan tries to use against us when he tempts.

When we are baptized into the Christian faith, it is not the beginning of a life of ease, free from the devil and his attacks. Instead, it is the opposite. We begin our life as God's children, and "at once" Satan comes after us. Our introduction into God's family marks us as Satan's prey, and he knows that his time to attack us is limited. Compared to eternity, he

has just the years of our earthly life to get us. As long as we are in this world, those temptations will never cease.

Satan will search to attack us when we are vulnerable. He came after Jesus when he was alone in the barren wilderness. Where is that place of danger for us? Well, we are called to live and work in a world that can often feel like a spiritual desert, where we are often alone to fight our spiritual battles and where wild enemies are constantly seeking to devour us. It is in God's house, surrounded by fellow believers where God offers protection. How dangerous it is then, when we choose to stay away from the protection and sustenance that is given by God's Word and Sacrament! How susceptible we leave ourselves when we isolate ourselves from brothers and sisters in Christ!

And Satan is waiting, that wild animal ready to destroy. He knows just what to offer; he knows just what to say. We are up against an enemy that knows our weaknesses and can capitalize on our vulnerabilities. Mark's words set a very clear picture: Squaring off against Satan is never easy. And our lives provide evidence of battles that are full of failure.

That is why we give thanks for what we see in this showdown. To this point, Satan had always succeeded. Starting with Adam and Eve, and continuing with every person that had ever lived, Satan was undefeated in getting people to sin. He had capitalized when they were vulnerable; he had succeeded in exposing their weaknesses.

But in this desert wilderness, when the stakes were highest and the salvation of mankind hung in the balance, Satan was defeated. Though it wasn't easy – it never is – Jesus resisted Satan's attacks as he relied on the words and promises of God, and as he was encouraged and supported by the angels that God has promised to send to all those who need help in battling against the devil. Jesus won this battle with the perfection that God demanded, and he would win every battle that he fought as our Substitute sent by God. Jesus' stance against Satan in the desert wilderness was a prelude to the victory that we will again

hear about at the end of this Lenten journey on Easter Sunday.

And that changes how we view the temptations that we face in our lives. As Christians, we are called to face Satan and resist his temptations, yet the victory in our battle against Satan is never determined by the results that come from our showdowns with Satan. Our victory was determined by the result of Jesus's showdown with Satan. When we face temptations in this life; when we struggle under the difficulty of standing against Satan's attacks, give thanks that we look to Jesus as our Savior, not just our Example.

During this season of Lent, may we understand clearly that the life of the Christian is marked by battle as we face temptations. As we are called to endure, let us give thanks that we are under the Spirit's guidance and the angels' protection. In the wilderness of this world, let us look to Jesus' perfection, not just for inspiration, but for the resounding victory that it gives us in the face of the devil's attacks.