

The Easy Way Out

First Sunday in Lent
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16
Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

One of the responsibilities that parents often have with children is the supervision of musical lessons. Getting the kids to practice is never easy. The first problem is just getting them to sit down to do it. Then, the second problem begins. Did you ever notice how easy it is to re-play the familiar? The prospect of struggling through a new piece seems like torture, so the temptation is not to bother, to be satisfied with old, familiar songs, and not to wrestle with the difficult, seemingly impossible new ones. The temptation is to take the easy way out.

But is this true only of children and musical lessons? All of us face days filled with the temptation to take the easy way out. Do we put on our sweats, and walk or run this morning? No! It's cold, wet and we don't want to get sick. So, we snuggle down in the warm bed for a few more winks.

What about the issue we've been avoiding with our spouse? Now would be a good time to talk it out; no one's in the house. But, no, the phone might ring and we'll get interrupted. That would just make it harder. And anyway, maybe the issue will go away by itself. It sometimes does, you know.

And what about that pain in your knee? You really should go to the doctor and get it checked. But . . . you're really busy right now, and anyway, it's probably just a stiff joint.

We face situation after situation everyday in which the choice is not between good and evil, but rather between what is hard and what is easy. The temptation we face, each day, is always to take the easy way out, and then to rationalize it away with a thousand and one excuses.

Is this a serious issue, you ask? At first glance, it would appear not. The examples used all seem fairly insignificant and the rationalizations sound reasonable. Who really cares, after all, if I choose to sleep in rather than exercise, or choose to ignore what's obviously just an old knee getting stiff? Is what I've labeled a temptation – to take the easy way out – really a big deal?

Well, theologian Helmut Thielicke thinks it is. In his sermon titled, "How Evil Came Into the World," he reminds us that "all temptations in life begin in sugared form."

I don't want to take our time today to debate whether there really is a devil or not. Call evil the devil, the tempter, satan, the evil one, or the prince of this world, as the scripture does. It makes no difference how we personify it, how we give it shape, what names we use. There is evil in the world. It has been witnessed to since biblical times and we know it today in various forms and shapes. We've seen its ugly face in the

genocides of past decades in Auschwitz, in Bosnia, and in Iraq where innocent people are killed for no reason other than they are of a certain race or creed.

Or, look into the dark corners of our own hearts, if we dare. Do we know evil? Every time we hurt someone intentionally. Every time we try to make ourselves better than others and feel good about that. Every time we allow others to be hurt, standing idly by on the sidelines. We know evil.

And what of temptations in this world? Do we know them as well? You bet! Every day, in a thousand and one subtle ways.

Maybe we need to rethink our whole notion of sin. Maybe we need to think of sin in broader categories than just those "things we have done," and "things we have left undone." Maybe the most uncomplicated definition of sin we could give would be our inclination to take the easy way out most of the time.

Our Gospel text for today offers a good way to assess our new understanding. The devil offers Jesus temptations which seem, on the surface at least, harmless enough. They are certainly not temptations to do evil or bad things. The devil is just encouraging Jesus to take the easy road in order to show the world that he really is the Son of God. Let's look, again, at these "harmless" temptations.

"Command this stone to become a loaf of bread" – temptation number one. Not a bad idea, really. Think about it. A lot of good could come from such a move. Changing stones to bread could move the world in a giant leap toward feeding the hungry masses. Thousands of lives could be saved. Isn't that worth some consideration? Replay in your mind the recent images of Haiti after the earthquake, as people scrounge and beg and stand in long lines for food. Bread-making from stones could feed such as these, and millions more. Isn't God concerned with the hungry?

Or what about that second temptation? "Worship me," says the devil, "and to you I will give authority over all earthly kingdoms." Don't dismiss this one too quickly, either. There are some real possibilities here. Think about what it would mean if Jesus really were in charge around here. If Jesus had control, there would be no need for armies, for peace would be the order of the world. Wealth and resources would be shared equitably with all neighbors. We wouldn't need a United Nations Peace Keeping Force to ensure the fair sharing of food supplies. It would all be done, by Jesus, who had the power to make it happen. It's a plan that deserves some careful thought.

And what about that third temptation? "Jesus, throw yourself down from here" and let God perform a dramatic rescue. Again, think of the consequences. If Jesus did this, it would show that God can be manipulated to do what we want and what we need. It would show us once and for all that he really is here for us. And think of the consequences for Jesus' following.

Do you see the point of these three examples? The temptations were so subtle. Each one encouraged him to attend to his own desires and needs, and to forget about his ultimate destiny. And we could easily rationalize the outcomes! These "harmless" temptations could lead to Jesus being King of the World immediately and easily – no more preaching to crowds on hillsides or by lakes; no more healing all those sick bodies

one at a time; no more teaching to those who seem not to understand; and, most important of all, no cross to bear. It would have been the easy way out and it would have lead away from Calvary and death. But it would also have led away from Easter morning.

The temptation of Jesus was to take the easy way out; to choose another way other than the cross. Maybe that's our temptation, too.

If we are honest we have to confess that it is hard to be a follower of Jesus sometimes. Carrying a cross does not come naturally to us. It can be hard to be a child of God. There is evil in this world that must be confronted and that confrontation can be painful. The crosses that we may have to bear will hurt us, or drag us down, and we, too, are tempted to run from them, to take the easy way out. If we don't open our eyes to see the starving of this world, we don't have to share in their pain. If we close our ears to the cries of our neighbor who is so lonely no one notices her anyway, then we don't have to care about her tears because we won't let her in and those tears will never soil our shoulders.

We fall to the temptation to take the easy way out in so many subtle ways – in our neglect, or ignorance; in our uninvovement; in our blindness; in our prejudices; in our apathy – because the way of the cross is hard.

But here is the truth that Christians never need to forget – we do not carry our crosses alone, ever. The one who took up that cross in the first place not only has shown us how; in carrying his, he helps us shoulder ours. When our faith is weak, and trust is gone and we can't find God no matter how hard we look, he's there, carrying the cross, carrying us, through our temptations and in spite of our failures. He never takes the easy way out with us.

And then, we have one another. This is an amazing community in Christ. I have seen your caring for one another. You help carry one another's burdens and, in doing so, make them bearable. You shoulder one another's cares, and in doing so, lighten the load of those whose shoulders may be sagging and whose spirits are low. We never carry our crosses alone as part of Christ's family.

In Death Valley there is a place known as Dante's View. There, you can look down to the lowest spot in the United States, a depression in the earth 200 feet below sea level called Bad Water. But from that same spot, you can also look up to the highest peak in the United States, Mt. Whitney, rising to a height of 14,500 feet. One way leads to the lowest and the other way to the highest. From that point, called Dante's View, any movement must be in one or the other direction.

There are many times in life when we stand where the ways part and where choices must be made. It is often easier to trip along downhill than to walk the steady, maybe rocky, uphill path. But the path uphill leads to a cross – an empty cross. And the one who walks beside us is the one who hung there and defeated it.

AMEN.

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