

First Weekend in Lent (RCL/B):  
Mark 1:9-15  
February 17-18, 2024  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

This is the year of the **tiny** temptation story by St. Mark for this first weekend in Lent: just 2 verses, versus St. Matthew's 11 verses and St. Luke's 13 verses. I'm thinking this brevity and lack of detail are a good thing. After all, it takes a lot of unpacking to understand what Jesus' traditional 3 temptations might have to do with us. How do I draw a direct line between turning stones into bread, leaping off high parapets, kneeling down to worship Satan, and our everyday lives??

So instead we get a chance to revisit the 10 Commandments and how we might be tempted to disobey them. This especially comes to mind because this Sunday, February 18, is Martin Luther's heavenly birthday. He died on February 18, 1546. That's a long time ago, 478 years, but the Commandments are even older than that and haven't changed in the meantime. Luther had a special fondness for the Commandments, because God gave them to us as a gift, as a protective fence around our hearts, our homes, our families, our relationships, our society. They are not a cruel straightjacket to keep us from having fun; they are not an out-of-touch god's bid to suck the joy out of life; they are not an outmoded piece of legislation to govern people long dead. They are guardrails to keep us safe, to prevent us from careening off the road, rolling over, ending up injured or dead, destroying property and taking away other people's lives, too. They are basic rules for living for Jews and Christians alike, principles shared by other world religions as well.

- Don't lie.
- Don't steal.
- Don't cheat on your spouse.
- Don't kill anyone.

These simple rules are pretty much as basic as it gets.

So imagine how shocked and disheartened Martin Luther was when the people he'd sent out to quiz peasants and local clergy about the faith returned and told him most folks knew very little. They brought grim news. Many of the common folks and not a few clergy didn't know the commandments or the Apostles Creed or the Lord's Prayer. They didn't understand much about Holy Baptism or Holy Communion either. So Luther wrote a Small Catechism for the husband/father of a household to teach the women, children and servants about the faith. And he wrote a Large Catechism in which he went into greater depth so the priests would know what was going on, too. Martin Luther's Small Catechism is still the text we use to teach our youth in Confirmation class. In 2029, another 5 years, our curriculum will be 500 years old! And we're proud of it. It's great stuff.

There's always plenty of grist-for-the-mill in any day's news cycle to convince the kids that the Ten Commandments are always relevant and frequently violated. How 'bout this week?

- Aleksei Navalny's probable **murder** in a Russian prison
- An FBI informant's confession that he **lied** under oath
- Investigations of **adultery** playing into current court cases
- High profile clergy accused of **stealing**

We've got to teach our children and youth to be counter-cultural and to realize that **virtues have value**; they're good. **Vices are liabilities**; they're bad. Honesty, compassion, faithfulness, kindness, gentleness, self-control, self-sacrifice are commanded and commendable. Dishonesty, cruelty, faithlessness, rage, promiscuity, selfishness are prohibited by God. They might be result in some form of immediate gratification, but in the long run they dishonor God and neighbor, and they are destructive of self, others, and relationships.

So let's turn to pg. 1160 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. There we'll find *The Small Catechism of Martin Luther*, starting with the Ten Commandments, which our confirmands are learning about this year. I invite you to look at the list of 10, and offer your opinion about which are the easiest or hardest to follow, and why. (There are no right or wrong answers to this question 😊.)

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Before I read Martin Luther's explanations to the Commandments, I would have said "Thou shalt not kill" is the one I didn't have to worry about. But Luther expands our understanding to include helping our neighbor in every way possible, not just refraining from murder. That makes it more challenging to keep the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment. He explains that "Honor your father and your mother" also applies to those in authority over us. That's a lot of people, not just two. That's teachers and coaches and bosses and members of law enforcement and government officials. We learn in reading Luther's explanations that the commandments are more about "Thou shalt" than "Thou shalt not." This is why we frequently ask forgiveness for the **good** things we **haven't** done, and not just the **bad** things we **have** done. Temptation can go either way: I'm tempted to **do** the wrong thing, and I'm tempted **not** to do the right thing.

It's not always so easy to sort out. Let's remember that Satan loves to masquerade as an angel of light; Lucifer, after all, means Light-bearer. If Satan showed up with horns, tail and pitchfork, we'd know enough to run screaming in the opposite direction. But often he shows up, looks fine, sounds quite reasonable. We need the Holy Spirit's help to recognize pretense and reveal the evil beneath.

In the tiny temptation story in St. Mark's Gospel, we hear that angels ministered to Jesus during His time of temptation in the wilderness. He was not alone. Neither are we. Let's hold close to our hearts the reminder we find in the Letter to the Hebrews:

*.... [W]e do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.*  
(Hebrews 4:15)

Or *The Message* paraphrase:

*14-16 Now that we know what we have—Jesus, this great High Priest with ready access to God—let's not let it slip through our fingers. We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all—all but the sin. So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help.*

Martin Luther said that the Law, expressed in the 10 Commandments, has 2 purposes: to **protect** us, to be a protective fence, guarding the well-being of our relationships with God and neighbor, and also to **convict** us, to convince us that we are sinners in need of a Savior. No matter how hard we try, we're not going to get it **all** just right. We are saints and **sinners** at the same time. The Law will demand what we're unable to deliver, and it will drive us straight into the arms of the Gospel. **We cannot earn our salvation; we can only receive it as a free gift of God.** **Grace:** the love of God that comes to us as gift and not reward. **GRACE**, that beautiful acronym for **God's Riches At Christ's Expense**.

It is said that Luther's last words were along the lines of, "We are beggars, it is true." We show up at the divine banquet with nothing to commend us, with our sins trailing behind us, and yet we are invited in as honored guests, because of the graciousness of our God in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. That's worth thinking about, and thankfully we've got all of Lent to do just that. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

