**Hebrews 4:15** March 11, 2020

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Mid-week Lent 3

*Hebrews 4:15 We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Every year, our synod’s publishing house puts out a series for these mid-week Lenten services. Sometimes Pastor Gawel and I decide to use it. Sometimes we decide to work together on a home grown series. This year we liked the publishing house series. As you may remember, the theme for this year is *“The Son of God Goes Forth to Battle.”*

Now, I like the series, but there is a problem. The sum total of what I know about battle is from books, movies and listening to soldiers and former soldiers talk. So, when the theme for a Wednesday is something like tonight’s, “Skirmishes with the Enemy,” I get a little uneasy. A lot of people in front of me know a whole lot more about soldiery. So, if I say something and you think, “There goes pastor: talking about stuff he knows nothing about…” I beg your pardon and hope that you can hear what God is saying, in spite of me. Tonight,

**The Son of God Goes Forth to Battle: Skirmishes with the Enemy**

What are skirmishes? Skirmishes are the little incidents that happen around the edges of an armed conflict. While the mass of soldiers settles into its positions, out on the perimeter a scouting unit bumps into an enemy patrol. There is a brief firefight, one or two casualties, but the armies don’t react. Opposing generals scratch their chins and think, “Hmmm. So we know that they are there and here and here.” All the while the feelers are going out testing the other’s defenses.

In one way, that is a good way to think of the Christian life. In another way, it is sort of inappropriate. It is inappropriate because by comparing our many daily temptations to meaningless skirmishes, we might get the impression that temptation and sin are essentially minor little things that don’t even merit a footnote in the story of our lives. Let us never think that! James 2:10 tells us, *“Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.”* The doom of humanity was set in motion, not by Adam and Eve’s lifetime of sin, but by a single sin. Thinking of sin as a minor, meaningless conflict is inaccurate, even dangerous.

But in another sense, “Skirmishes with the Enemy” is an appropriate way to think of the Christian life in this fallen world. Whether there are major conflicts in our lives or not, there is this continual testing of spiritual defenses. Wherever we are, temptation will find us out. You know that even in church, even with your eyes closed and hands folded, temptations will find you out. The devil, the world and our sinful flesh never stop sending out little scouting parties to find chinks in our spiritual armor.

How assuring to hear the word of our reading this evening: ***“We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.”***

It is good for us to be clear what this verse is talking about. Without denying the fact, this reading is not primarily focusing on Jesus’ work as our Savior. This is speaking of us after we’ve been saved. And this reading is not providing comfort in all the earthly troubles we face. This reading is about our ongoing temptations. It is about the most unpleasant parts of being a Christian in a fallen word. It is about the spiritual skirmishes that just never seem to end.

These words talk about our times of spiritual frustration. (And if you have never felt spiritual frustration, then I suggest you get serious about your Christianity!) What is the longest war in American history? It is the eighteen years we have been in Afghanistan. Frustration describes many people’s feelings about that conflict that never seems to end. But if you are a life-long Christian retiree, you have been locked in a spiritual conflict for three or four times that long. Even if you are just finishing high school but were baptized as a child, you have been at war with sin as long as the longest American war. You have known the frustrated of continual spiritual skirmishes that never seem to end. There can be a feeling of futility.

I couldn’t find the quote, but once Martin Luther gave some guidelines for receiving Holy Communion. He said that every Christian should do what the Bible says: Before communion, spiritually examine yourself and repent. Someone asked, “But what if I don’t feel a need to repent?” Luther replied, “Pinch yourself. You must be in a dream world if you don’t think you have a reason to repent.” The more godly you are, the more you will see and feel the spiritual skirmishes going on every hour of your life.

As the continual skirmishes wear you down, how good to know that Jesus is more than a mighty warrior. He was also the consummate skirmisher. In the desert, fasting for forty days, he had the means to satisfy his desires by making the stones into bread, but he told himself, *“No. Just because I can doesn’t mean it’s right.”* When he told the disciples that he would die, and die by the frightening torture of crucifixion, Peter told him that surely there must be a short-cut to glory that doesn’t go through that dark alley. Jesus said to that temptation, *“Get behind me, Satan!”* In the Garden as the sins of the world began to crush him under their weight, he prayed, *“My Father, if it is possible, may this cup [of suffering] be taken from me.”* And then he went on, *“Yet not as I will, but as you will.”*

In every skirmish Jesus was victorious. True, he didn’t have the same sinful nature living in him that we have. But he did share the same human nature Adam and Eve, the first sinners had. Jesus knows the appetites at war within us.

Let me ask some questions that have everything to do with this: Why is it that mothers of young children will always form a knot over in the corner—or right in the middle of a room? Why is it that former soldiers search each other out in a crowd? Why is that teenagers share so much with peers, and so little with parents? The reason is sympathy. More than anything else, we human beings want to be understood. And the people who understand best are people like us. They not only know the facts, they have stood in our shoes, they have woken in the night with the same worries, they have lived through the same disappointments and joys. They laugh at the same jokes!

We sinners want to go to God, but we can’t. We are unworthy. He is so holy. But there is a priest, a high priest, who connects the two dots: God and us. The high priest is that go-between that mediator, who can make us worthy. *He* made the sacrifice for *our* sin.

But we have stood here before—oh, so often before! As disobedient children, as rebellious teenagers, as unfaithful middle-agers, as fearful and worried retirees. Here we stand again before the great high priest, Jesus, who has seen us stand before him confessing the same sins hundreds, thousands of times. Doesn’t this high priest get tired of us? Doesn’t he doubt our sincerity? Doesn’t he just want to chase us off until we get some real religion? Doesn’t he think, in his heart of hearts, that we are hypocrites? Isn’t he furious with our short-sightedness and selfishness and weakness and filthiness and perversions and laziness and…

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And so we come to him—again—our weapons of war bent and broken, confessing again, and he says, “Welcome, my children. It has all been atoned for. Find rest in me.” Amen.