Text: Matt 4:1-11

**Introduction**

When you take your ordination vows in the LCMS you take the Book of Concord, something which includes the small catechism, as you confession of faith in total. You do it “because they are in accord with the word of God.” There is an old enough argument here that the two camps have Latin terms. Quia, latin for because, summarizing that pledge that the entire book is in accord with Scripture. The other being Quatenus, latin for is so far as, implying that there might be something in the Confessions that is not in accord with the Scriptures. And so, the “shooting the bull” session question used to be: what one line of the Confessions might make you question that full quia because subscription.

Most of the time people respond with some obscure bit from the full Formula of Concord. That’s safer because it is much longer and nobody has read it. (Just kidding, slightly). The Apology of the Augsburg Confession falls in the same category. If you were feeling more daring you might bring up something from the Augsburg Confession itself. But even then usually from the article on the distinction of meats or monastic vows. What nobody ever would throw out was something from the Small Catechism. Because we all know it. A good number of us have it memorized. Somebody might actually think you are a heretic and not just playing a game.

So, let me first say that when I do something like I’m about to do, it is not truly to bring into question the confession. It is firmly to figure out why it is right. So when I would feel either emboldened or simply safe with the company discussing, I’d throw out Luther’s explanation to the sixth petition of the Lord’s prayer. That petition is “Lead us not into temptation”. Luther asks the question he always does, “What does this mean?” And his answers starts, “God tempts no one.”

Yet the first line of our text today is “Jesus was lead up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil.” And there are certainly other passages, many in the Old Testament, say like the Sacrifice of Isaac, or even “don’t eat of that tree” that certainly seem like divine temptation.

Anyone who has walked the Christian life long enough knows that these experiences are not simply scriptural stories. We often walk though the valley of the shadow of death. A table is prepared in the presence of my enemies. And if Jesus could make that cry of dereliction, there are times we to wonder where God has gone.

So, how are we to understand Luther’s assertion that “God tempts no one?”

**Text**

There is a simple answer provided in that first line of the gospel that I’ve already quoted. Yes, the Spirit did the leading, but the devil did the tempting. And this is true as far as it goes. But that kind of division always stuck me as too pat, too easy. The rest of Luther’s explanation of that petition is the “We pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair and other great shame and vice.” Being lead by the Spirit directly to the Devil would seem to be a big no to that petition. But why would God do this? And if He does – which is the plain reading of the Scripture – how is this not divine temptation?

I’m going to cut to the chase here with the understanding that I’ve worked out. And then see what that means against this text and our lives.

My understanding might be a bit wonky, I’m sorry, but it is consistent. In English we have two words: test and temptation. Why does a teacher give you a test? As much as students might think it is to fail them or embarrass them, it is not. A teacher gives a test to display what you have learned and hopefully to pass the test. At the worst it is given so that you know areas you might have to double back on in review. The test is ultimately for your good. But when someone tempts you, the end goal is that you fail. The tempter wants to confirm their low opinion of you.

In the biblical languages these two English words: testing and tempting are the same word. You’d determine the shade of meaning by the context. In that wilderness you have the Spirit leading Jesus and Satan. Now Satan firmly intends to tempt Jesus. Satan already thinks that we humans are a bunch of fools. He tricked Adam and Eve easily. The dialog at the beginning of the book of Job contains Satan’s caustic accusations against us. “He’s only faithful because you’ve put a hedge around him. Let me sift him and we’ll see just how faithless he becomes.” And even though this New Adam is also the Son of God, Satan is just as sure. He wants this one to fail in the wilderness, just as Israel failed in the wilderness. But what Satan intends for evil, God intends for good. The Spirit lead Jesus into the wilderness not for temptation, but testing. This is immediately after Jesus’ baptism and the Words of the Father, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.” He is not lead out to fail, but allowed a time of testing to display why the pleasure of the Father rests on him.

So likewise Luther’s explanation isn’t wrong. God tempts no one. God does not desire that we fail and fall into sin. But there are times when the answer to that petition is no. When God allows us to be tested. And that time of testing is so that we either come to understand the strength of the faith which lives in us, or so that we can understand the love of the Father who never turns away from the repentant. In the test we come to understand either what The Father has already built in us or just how solid a foundation has been given to us in Christ to call us back.

So turning quickly to the textual temptations it is worth trying to understand Satan’s methods. Which I would say have not changed since the garden. I’m sure that there are many other glosses one could put on these, but for me these are the tests that give a certain understanding.

The first is the most simple, and probably the one that we have the most trouble with. It is simply the temptations of the belly or the flesh. It had been 40 days and 40 nights and he was hungry. We modern Americans are not a fasting people. We hear those numbers and think that isn’t possible. But extreme fasting is reported by monks of all religions. But what I think it really represents is how the temptations of the material world scales to our situation. A poor man might kill someone for a few bucks. A hungry man might turn his back on God for a loaf of bread. Passing this test is a correct recognition of the limitations of the flesh and its correct ordering. Jesus recognized that he was hungry. Likewise God recognizes that we need food and clothing. Look at the birds of the air. But if it feels like His providence has taken a holiday, look to your priority ordering. If you have a million dollars but have lost Christ, you do not have life.

So maybe we have mortified our sinful nature. We have rightly valued the eternal over the temporal. The second temptation is to take that eternal – the Word of God – and twist it to serve our own desires. To read the Word of God using the devil’s dictionary. God says he’s going to deliver you, demand that he do it right now. That is the deep temptation in that time of testing. It’s Job’s ultimate failure. God, I’ve done nothing wrong, I demand you come down and explain yourself. You’ve promised Good and look at this mess you’ve allowed. God responds “who darkens my counsel without knowledge, were you there when I laid the foundations?” The promises of God are to be clung to in faith. God keeps his promises in his time. “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.”

So if the fist one was a temptation aimed at a sinful nature, and the second was the devil himself, the third is the temptation of the world. All those Kingdoms and all their glory are Satan’s. Satan’s temptations always have a strong element of truth. But they are only his temporally. God has started to reclaim them in Christ. And the day is coming when all nations will bow. The temptation is to cast away the eternal for passing glory now – for the pomp and circumstance of the world. To which Jesus reminds us that there is only one King worth worshipping. Put not your trust in princes – like Satan’s promises – that disappear the day they are gone.

**Application**

So how does this work for us?

Daily we are tempted by they devil, the world and our own sinful nature. God does not lead us into these temptations. But neither does God blink us out of this world. Some days we are like Superman over those temptations - leaping them in a single bound. And some days are the day of trial. Satan has asked to sift us – uniquely us – like wheat.

Lead us not into temptation. But we pray that you would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world and our sinful nature many not lead us. But that we might be lead by the Spirit. Although we are attacked by these things, we pray that we may overcome them and win the victory.

We have been lead like Jesus by the Spirit not to fail, but to know. To know that Christ has won. And he has given us the victory. Amen