Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, grace and peace be with you always.

Today’s bible reading about Jesus in the wilderness being tempted by devil makes me think about taking piano lessons. Now, bear with me here. I was age 6 when my mom arranged for me to begin learning how to play the piano. All year long (summers included) I took weekly piano lessons from Lila Byng in her home up the hill from the high school. Every Tuesday afternoon I’d sit at her Story and Clark piano and play through the pieces that she had listed on the little notebook she kept for me. I suppose I had 4 or 5 pieces that I was to have practiced throughout the week.

Now, I know when a kid is taking piano lessons, that parents are signing on to something as well. One of the responsibilities that parents have when their kids take music lessons is making sure they practice. Getting kids to practice is never easy. Now, I think my mom would say it was easier to get me to practice than my sisters. Beyond getting the student to practices, parents face another challenge and that’s to make sure the budding pianist doesn’t just play the favorite, familiar piece over and over – but does the hard work of learning new music. I can’t imagine how many times my mom had to encourage me to work on the new music and not just take the easy way out and play the pieces I liked.

Taking the easy way is true not just for kids taking piano lessons. All of us face days filled with the temptation to take the easy way out. This might apply to issues of physical well-being. Do we do what we know is good for us and get some form of exercise every day or do we watch more tv? Do we take 15 minutes each day to pray and read daily devotions or do we sleep an extra 15 minutes? Do we face the issue we’ve been avoiding with our spouse or let the kids interrupt again so that the avoidance can continue? And what about that pain in your lower back that’s bothered you for a couple of months; you really should go to the doctor and get it checked. But there are so many things to tend to right now, and it’s probably just a pulled muscle.

We face situations every day in which we can take the easy way out. 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 to take the easy way out, and then to rationalize it away with a thousand excuses.

Is this a serious issue? At first glance, it would appear not. My illustrations all seem fairly insignificant and the rationalizations sound reasonable. Who really cares, after all, if I choose to sleep in rather than exercise, or watch TV rather than read my bible, or choose to ignore what might only be a pulled muscle in my back? Is what I've labeled a temptation (to take the easy way out) really a big deal?

Helmut Thielicke, a German author and theologian who stood at odds with the Nazis in the 1930's and 40's wrote a sermon titled: "How Evil Came Into the World," and he reminds us that "all temptations in life begin in sugared form."

The bible reading today brings temptation and evil right before our eyes. In this account, the devil offers Jesus temptations which seem, on the surface, harmless enough. They’re not temptations to do evil. The temptation Jesus faces are aimed to get him to take the easy way out. And as the devil puts the temptation before Jesus, his goal is to be affirmed as God.

Now, a little time out here - because some of you are wondering about the devil. Every so often I get asked about the devil and where the devil came from. The bible isn’t shy about referring to the devil or the evil one. There are many labels in the Bible when referring to the devil. Yet, we’re not told where the devil came from. It doesn’t make much difference because the reality is there is evil in the world. We’ve seen it throughout our life time. From Hitler’s concentration camps to Darfur’s deserts where genocide is the rule of the day to the murder of children in schools - evil isn’t difficult to see in this world.

But what of evil closer to us? In our own minds and hearts? Every time we hurt someone intentionally, every time we try to make ourselves better than others, every time we allow others to be hurt - we know a more personal evil.

Today’s bible reading has three temptations and they all offer us some insight into how Jesus handled them and from that - I hope we might learn something good for our faithful living and following Jesus.
Temptation #1: The devil says to Jesus: "Command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Not a bad idea, really. Think about it. A lot of good could come from such a move. Changing stones to bread could help billions of people starving in this world. If stones could be turned into bread we’d never have to see those pictures of emaciated children or mothers too weak to nurse their babies. Stones to bread - temptation #1 the devil put before Jesus. Making bread from stones could feed the world.

Temptation #2: "Worship me," says the devil, "and to you I will give you authority over all earthly kingdoms."

There are some real possibilities here. Think about what it would mean if Jesus really were in charge around the world. If Jesus had control, there would be no wars and no threats of violence. We’d have no need for nuclear weapons and massive military might. The $1.6 trillion dollars the world spends on military protection every year could go to make sure everyone has shelter and medical care and a quality public education. If Jesus had all authority over the world, wealth and resources would be shared more equitably so there would be no poverty and people in need. This temptation to give Jesus authority over all deserves some thought.

And the 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 God really is here for us.

Do you see the point of these three examples? The temptations the devil puts before Jesus were so subtle. And we could easily rationalize the outcomes! These "harmless" temptations could lead to Jesus being Savior of the World immediately and easily. Jesus wouldn’t have had to spend a few years preaching and teaching; he wouldn’t have had to stop and heal the sick, and, most important of all, there would have been no betrayal and no cross to bear. No dying, suffering, or death. Jesus could have given into the devil’s temptation. It would have been the easy way out for Jesus. But it would not have been faithful. For the easy way out would have lead away from the cross and death -- and Easter and an empty tomb, and the powerful reality that God has the final word about life that conquers sin and death.

The real temptation of Jesus by the devil was to choose another way than the cross Maybe ... maybe that is our temptation too.

The cross. It’s a reminder to us of Jesus’ faithfulness in the face of temptation. The cross - the symbol of suffering and death – which was changed dramatically by God in raising Jesus from death. But in our lives - we know the cross, don’t we? If you know suffering or grief- you know the cross. If you have experienced pain and the agony of death’s aftermath - you know the cross. So every time we wish we could avoid the cross, avoid those hard aspects of life – every time we think that God should give us an easier way in life, we are tempted as Jesus was tempted.

I know faithfulness to God is sometimes incredibly difficult - because at times we’re tempted to think our faith should shield us from the agonies of life. Being children of God doesn’t come with a promise that life is going to be sweet and easy. Jesus shows us clearly that faithfulness demands something of us. There is evil in this world that we must stand again and sometimes confront. 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. We’re tempted to look away from those pictures of the starving people of this world so we don't have to be discomforted by their plight. Then, we don't have to be uncomfortable about our full refrigerators and unending supply of food. If we avoid paying the visit to the sick or dying friend, then we don’t have to face our own fears of dying. Temptations arise when we don’t care about injustices, where some people never have a chance to live with the basic necessities of life and we are fully comfortable all the time.

You see, we fall to the temptation to take the easy way out in so many subtle ways -- in our neglect, or ignorance; in our un-involvement; in our prejudices; in our apathy -- because following Jesus in the way of the cross is hard. And every day we are Guilty. We’re all guilty. Every day.

But, the good news is that God doesn’t leave us stranded in our guilt and stuck in the evil we create and contribute to. We do not face the cross alone. We do not carry it alone. The person who took up that cross in the first place not only has shown us how; in carrying his, he helps shoulder ours. He carried his and conquered it and because of that victory, he carries ours too. When our faith is weak, and trust is gone and we can't find God no matter how hard we look, God's there, carrying the cross, carrying us, through our temptations and in spite of our failures. God
never takes the easy way out with us. Thank God!

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 west and some 85 miles away you can see the highest peak in the continental United States, Mount Whitney, rising to a height of 14,500 feet. Look down - and see the way to the lowest point in the country and look up to the highest. At Dante's View, any movement must be in one direction or the other.

The temptations that come into our lives all the time – give us a choice. One choice is the easy way out - taking the downhill path that doesn’t demand much of us. The other choice is uphill. This choice demands effort and discipline.

The path uphill leads to a cross -- an empty cross. And the one that walks beside us is the one that didn’t take the easy way out, but hung there for us, defeating sin and death. Good news? You bet. Amen.