

Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

The Lord's Prayer: Our Unity

August 4, 2019

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James 1:2-4, 12-16

Psalm 91

Matthew 4:1-11

Lead us not into temptation



"Follow Me Satan" (Temptation of Christ) by Ilya Efimovich

A reading from Matthew's gospel, chapter 4:

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written,

*'One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

*'Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.'*"

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray:

God, we've heard all this before, in fact, some of us pray every day: *lead us not into temptation, do not bring us to the time of trial*, but do we know what it means? What are our temptations? How do we overcome them? As we consider your word, Holy God, surprise us again with your truth. Open our hearts and minds, and amaze us with love and hope. Amen.

What does the word "temptation" mean to you? I asked the Wednesday Bible class that question. Someone immediately said: "ice crème." Somebody else added "pizza!" Everyone laughed and agreed that there are plenty of other temptations we are simply too polite to mention.

So I asked the kids at Music and Drama Camp. They were a bit more circumspect. When I said, “What does temptation mean to you?” One child said, “Anxiety.” Good answer. Another mentioned the temptation to disobey. For kids temptation usually means the attraction of something they know is wrong or unwise...or the strong desire for candy.

Was anybody tempted to sleep in this morning? There’s help for you. It’s called a Clocky. Get one of these and you will never be late to church again! When Clocky goes off it doesn’t play soft music; it makes an awful sound until you turn it off ... but you have to catch it first. The thing runs around the room, and you have to chase it. By the time you catch it, you’re up.



This was invented by an MIT alumna of Tupper Hyde! Wonder if she could invent donuts that run away! I have even heard that there’s software you can install that will notify someone if you look at pornography. It will also alert them if you uninstall the software.

There will always be siren songs and alluring entertainments, things that muddy our vision and distract us from our true path. *Lead us not into temptation.* That’s the King James Version. The NRSV reads, *Do not bring us to the time of trial.*

Jesus understands temptation. He was tempted and tested in every way that we are. The early church certainly knew that. This story of his temptation in the wilderness appears in three of the four gospels. There must have been some confusion in the church about who was responsible for that famous showdown between Jesus and Satan, because the apostle James wrote:

Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. That one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised...No one, when tempted, should say, ‘I am being tempted by God’ for God cannot be tempted and God tempts no one.

But, it does say quite clearly in the first line of today’s gospel reading that Jesus was *led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.* Who is the Spirit? It was God’s Spirit, the Holy Spirit. God tested Jesus, or more precisely, God allowed the devil to test him (more on that next Sunday). Jesus passed! He stood the test and received the crown of life. He proved his mettle, the same way his ancestor Abraham did, and Job did when he was tempted to deny his God.

For me, it’s helpful to know that in the Ancient Greek and Hebrew languages the word for “tempt” and “test” are the same. Not so in modern English. We speak of “temptation” as the urge to get involved in something evil or harmful, and temptation can be that, but most of the

time the test involves something far more subtle. In the ancient language of the Lord's Prayer a "temptation" is a litmus test.

Clearly, no one wants to be tested, just as no student wants to be given an exam. But tests happen, and it's best to prepare. We pray to God, *Do not lead us into the time of trial*, knowing full well that something will happen every day that tests our courage and our faith.

For you, maybe the test is a loss, a defeat or a failure. Maybe it's an illness, or a situation, or a danger – all kinds of things will test your faith. God allows those trials, though I wish to God he didn't. We should never say, "It is God's will," or tell someone, "God is testing you." We never know enough to say that. When his 24-year-old son died tragically in a car accident, Bill Coffin was the senior pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City. He wrote: "My own consolation lies in knowing that it was *not* the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over his sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break."ⁱ

Here's an example. The Swedish author, Par Lagerkvist (Par La'ger keest) won the Nobel Prize for his novel, *Barabbas*. It's the fictional story of the prisoner who was chosen by the crowd instead of Jesus to be released in a customary pardon before Passover.

In the story Barabbas is an outlaw and an unbeliever. He tries to understand what he hears others say about Jesus, the man who has been crucified in his place. But Barabbas is a slave, and in his whole wretched life he has never experienced love, which is the core of Jesus' message.

He is forced to work in a copper mine; he's chained to another slave named Sahak who believes that Jesus is the Messiah. Each slave is tagged with a metal disk proclaiming that he is a possession of Caesar. Sahak has another marking on the back of his disk that spells out *Christos Jesus* (Christos Yay-zoos) announcing that his true loyalty is to Jesus Christ.

Barabbas asks to have his own disk be inscribed with the name of Jesus. The two work secretly in the mine to carve the name into Barabbas' tag. But someone overhears and reports them, and they are hauled before the governor who questions the markings. Sahak tells him that it is the name of his God. The governor reminds them that Caesar is god, and that having other gods is a capital crime.

The governor questions Barabbas. Does he worship the god whose name is on his disk? Barabbas shakes his head. No. "I have no god," he answers so softly that his words can barely be heard.

Sahak gives him a look of surprise and pain. The governor presents the same question to Sahak. Is he wearing the name of his God? Yes. "And do you realize that if you renounce your God, you will not be punished?" "I cannot," he answers. The governor orders Sahak be taken out and crucified. Then he takes a knife in one hand and Barabbas' disk in the other and scratches out the name of Jesus. For the rest of his life Barabbas wears the crossed-out name of Jesus.ⁱⁱ

That is what this phrase in the Lord's Prayer is all about. *Lead us not into temptation. Do not bring us to the time of trial*. It's not about minor temptations and distractions that turn our heads,

although those are real. It's about the possibility that we will turn our backs on his kingdom. Jesus teaches us to pray that God will keep us far away from the temptation to deny him.

The temptations that Satan put before Jesus – all three: the bread, the audience, the power, had one thing in common. They were all appeals to self. Satan is trying to convince Jesus to put himself, not God, at the center of the universe. That's always the temptation; that's always where we get into trouble. When we look away from God's purpose and place our own safety, our own desires, aspirations, our own opinions, our own fears and feelings at the center -- in the place of God, we deny him.

We will *encounter various trials*, as the reading from James says. So many temptations: the enticement of minor goals, the lure of the easy way out, the seduction of pleasure, cynicism, laziness, bitterness, despair. Those are adult temptations.

Satan tempted Jesus in the same way evil messes with us – trying to get him to put himself at the center. Evil tries to convince us to put ourselves, or our kids, or our job, or our recreation at the center. Jesus must have known that temptation was to come; he was prepared for the test. And he found out that the devil can quote scripture. You knew that too, I guess.

Peter was tested. He denied Jesus, not once but three times. Peter prepared for the test too, but he didn't do as well. In that moment when knowing Jesus was about to cost him his life, Peter scratched out the name of Jesus. Peter denied him, claimed he'd never met him. I wish he had remembered earlier when he tried to walk on water. As long as Peter kept his eyes on Jesus and didn't look away -- as long as he kept Jesus right there in the center of his vision, he was fine -- but as soon as he started to look around, he began to sink. That's temptation.

Did Jesus let him drown? Of course not! He grabbed him out of the deep and threw him in the boat! Here is what I told the kids at Music and Drama camp: Sometimes we mess up...we give in to temptation; it happens, but there's forgiveness. There is always new life. In the church, our middle name is Grace.

Grace is one reason I'm such a fan of small group ministry. In small groups like ChristCare, Bible studies, and Journey Groups we look out for one another. With honesty and kindness we help keep each other free of distractions, and when somebody's faith is tested, we stand together and try very hard to build one another up in love. When my husband had cancer surgery last year, there were ChristCare groups who brought dinner to our house every night for a month... others prayed for us.

That presence makes it much harder to fear. Fear is the opposite of faith. Fear is evil's best weapon. So Jesus taught us to pray:

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For you God, yours is the kingdom, and yours is the power, and the glory, forever.

ⁱ William Sloane Coffin, Jr., from a sermon "Alex's Death" preached at the Riverside Church, New York, NY

ⁱⁱ Par Lagerkvist, *Barabbas*, Random House, 1951, 141-147