

“Lead Us Not into Temptation”

*Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
August 22, 2010*

Mark 1:9-15, I Corinthians 10:1-13

Today I continue my sermon series on the Lord’s Prayer by looking at the first part of the petition “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” As we delve into the phrase “Lead us not into temptation,” it is worth noting that it comes on the heels of “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”, a petition that is about our moral indebtedness to God - it is about our need to experience and express forgiveness. The fact is, all of us stand in need of God’s grace and mercy. None of us gets it right all the time when it comes to living a life of faith. We are all susceptible to acting in ways that don’t reflect God’s best intentions for us and for the larger world. We do that every day. Just as to pray “give US this day our daily bread” reminds us that we are linked to one another and all humanity in our common need for sustenance, and to pray, “forgive US our debts as we forgive our debtors (or those who have sinned against us” connects us to a larger whole in our need for grace, to pray lead US not into temptation is to affirm again that we are all in the same boat when it comes our capacity for being led astray.

The witness of our faith says that there is One who was able to withstand temptation, and who can help us in our times of being tempted. As you listen to our first scripture passage, from the Gospel of Mark’s account of the beginning of Jesus ministry, note first, that Mark says that the Spirit **drove** him into the wilderness to be tempted, and second, that Mark, with characteristic brevity, doesn’t outline the particular temptations Jesus faced in the wilderness, and third, that Jesus appears to have passed the test with flying colors, because right afterward, he is energized to proclaim his message of the kingdom of God. *Read Mark here.*

Our second passage comes from the Apostle Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth. The Corinthian community of faith was far from perfect, filled as it was with human beings who were susceptible to missing the whole point of following Jesus. So he had to remind them in the famous text from I Corinthians 13 that love was the greatest and most abiding of the gifts. The passage I am about to read comes a few chapters earlier, and it shows Paul pointing back to an earlier period in the history of Israel - when the people who had been delivered by God through the Exodus from Egypt lost their moral compass in the wilderness. Learn from their example what not to do, Paul seems to be saying. Be aware how easy it is to stumble, to lose your way. Note at the end, how he tells them that God will not let them be tested beyond their strength. This is the passage from which we get the old adage, “God won’t give you anything more than you can handle.” But we so often forget that it goes on to say, essentially, “with God’s help”, or “if you rely upon God for strength.” Listen now for God’s word in I Corinthians 10. *Read I Corinthians here.*

Occasionally I come across a bumper sticker that makes me chuckle even while it expresses a relatively profound theological insight. Such was the case when I laid my eyes on one that said, “Lead me not into temptation. I can find the way myself.” That bumper sticker gets to the heart of why the phrase, “Lead us not into temptation,” has always bothered me. Whatever the arena of life in which we happen to be most vulnerable to lacking self-discipline, for me one of those areas is when it comes to eating a reasonable amount of food, I suppose most of us can find the way to temptation all by ourselves, thank you. That’s why I try to avoid “all you can eat” buffets, by the way.

I don't want to think that God would ever intentionally lead me into being tempted. That's something I can do all on my own. And in fact, the book of James says, *No one, when tempted, should say, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one.*¹ So why, beyond the fact that it is in the Lord's Prayer, should you and I have to pray, "Lead us not into temptation?"

To begin to answer that question, it helps to look at what the word translated as temptation in the New Testament actually means. *Peiraso*, which in some instances is translated temptation, is in other cases translated, testing, trial or time of trial. So the NRSV version of the Lord's Prayer reads, lead us not into *the time of trial*. When Jesus, facing down his own temptations in the moments before his arrest, is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, he scolds Peter and the others for falling asleep, saying, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Jesus could see what was ahead of him and knew that standing for love would cost him his life. He knew what he wanted - to let the cup of suffering pass from him - but he went on to pray, "*Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.*"

Sometimes, being faithful really does put us to the test. It challenges us to stand up for what we believe, to be true to who we are, to follow through on our commitments, even sometimes to endure pain because we care so much for other people.

As I read lead us not into temptation and Jesus' admonition to Peter in the context of the rest of the New Testament, I simply cannot believe that it means, "Don't let me ever have to face anything difficult or challenging." It is impossible to square this with a Jesus who called his disciples to take up their own crosses and follow him, a Jesus who said, "*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted,*" and "*If someone steals your cloak, give him your coat also.*" To pray, "Lead us not into temptation" can't mean "Let me skate through life without ever having to endure hardship or suffering on account of my faith. Above all, Lord, let me be comfortable."

I have a friend who questions why comfort has become one of our highest values, even in communities of faith. "That proposal doesn't make me comfortable," we say. "I'm just not comfortable with that idea." I imagine almost all of us have used phrases like that to avoid challenge and change. When, my friend asks, did we start to believe that whether or not we are comfortable with something trumps whether or not we are being faithful? The truth is that sometimes being faithful means making uncomfortable decisions, not taking the path of least resistance, not choosing what would be most pleasurable or the easiest course of action in the short run. And as we make those decisions, something happens. When we chose the harder course, when we choose to be challenged, our faith gets stronger. It grows. So to pray "lead us not into temptation" doesn't mean, "Don't ever challenge me."

Being faithful means resisting the temptation to cheat on one's taxes or one's wife. It means resisting the all too easy course of looking down our noses at other people who don't share our views or condemning people who give into their own temptations. It means doing some things that we would really rather not do, and avoiding doing some other things that might seem like a lot of fun at the time. I look back on the times I've thought, "I'm tempted to give him a piece of my mind." That's a temptation that I'm better off resisting. But then again there are times when I have been tempted not to speak when I should have.

I think a better way to understand, "Lead me not into temptation (or the time of trial)," is to hear it as, "Give me the strength to be true to who I am when life gets hard." One of my colleagues talks about when his father dropped him off at college for the first time. His father resisted the urge to give him a long speech on the long ride to campus, trying to impart all the wisdom that he could pack into those three hours on the highway. Instead, after they had unloaded the car, carried everything up to the dorm room,

and made the bed, the father spoke these words, “Son, I just want you to remember who you are and Whose you are.”²

I’ve come to believe that “Lead me not into temptation” means “Don’t ever let me get to the place where I forget who I am and Whose I am. I belong to you, God.” When Jesus taught the disciples to pray, “*Lead us not into temptation,*” he was challenging the disciples to say to God, “Don’t ever let us forget that we belong to you, no matter what challenges we have to face.”

There are all kinds of temptations that we face in daily life. One of them is complacency, to just be content with the status quo and to settle for letting our spiritual lives stagnate. Another temptation is to make things more important than people. I think two of the biggest temptations we can face are the temptation to ingratitude and the temptation to believe that we can handle life all on our own.

Let me deal with that second temptation first - the temptation to believe that we can handle life all on our own. I struggle with that temptation from time to time when I think it will be easier for me to do a task all by myself rather than delegating it to someone else. I struggle with that temptation, from time to time when Judith has to remind me, “You know, God really is out there. You don’t have to handle this all by yourself.”

There are all sorts of situations in which we face that temptation: the temptation to think that we can make it on our own, that we are supposed to be utterly independent. I believe one of the prime times that people face this temptation is in the process of aging. I know so many people, and I have known so many people over the course of my ministry, who would benefit from saying, “You know I need a little help here. This aging process is not easy and I can’t live on my own anymore.” But they are tempted to be independent. And independence is great, until the time comes when you have to say “I need help.” To acknowledge that, and to ask for the help you need, is a spiritual task.

So what about the other temptation, the temptation to ingratitude? I think that comes when we go through our days and think, “Isn’t it great what I have amassed, what I have done for myself?” Too often we don’t even think about showing our gratitude for the gifts life has given us. We just take them for granted.

This week, speaking of gratitude, I had the chance to go see Mary Chapin Carpenter. Thank you to the person who made that possible! Before I went to the concert I thought to myself, “I know a little bit about Mary Chapin Carpenter, and I like her songs, I know some of them, but I’d like to know more about her.” So I did a Google search to reacquaint myself with Mary Chapin’s work. And I came across an entry about her that led me to a segment she did for *This I Believe* On NPR.

Six weeks after she had been diagnosed with blood clots in her lungs and almost died, she was interviewed by NPR and this is what she said. It is a move beyond the temptation to ingratitude.

“Sometimes, it's the smile of a stranger that helps. Sometimes it's a phone call from a long absent friend, checking on you. I found my lifeline at the grocery store.

One morning, the young man who rang up my groceries and asked me if I wanted paper or plastic also told me to enjoy the rest of my day. I looked at him and I knew he meant it. It stopped me in my tracks. I went out and I sat in my car and cried.

What I want more than ever is to appreciate that I have this day, and tomorrow and hopefully days beyond that. I am experiencing the learning curve of gratitude.

I don't want to say "have a nice day" like a robot. I don't want to get mad at the elderly driver in front of me. I don't want to go crazy when my Internet access is messed up. I don't want to be jealous of someone else's success. You could say that this litany of sins indicates that I don't want to be human. The learning curve of gratitude, however, is showing me exactly how human I am.

I don't know if my doctors will ever be able to give me the precise reason why I had a life-threatening illness. I do know that the young man in the grocery store reminded me that every day is all there is, and that is my belief.”³

God lead us not into the temptation to forget that every day is all there is, that all there is comes from you, and that we have a responsibility to say thank you and to acknowledge our dependence on You. In other words, *God, don't ever let us forget who we are and Whose we are.*

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ James 1:12

² I must confess I can't remember which of my colleagues told me this story or in what context

³ You can find the This I Believe segment with Mary Chapin Carpenter here:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=11182405>