

When Temptation, Testing and Evil Come

Matthew 6:13; Luke 4:1-13; Matthew 26:36-41; James 1:13

Today we conclude our Sundays with the Lord's Prayer. It is the prayer of Jesus. We can hear his voice here. And he has given it to us to pray it alongside him, as he prays it with us— and with all who pray it, all over the world.

I

This last double petition has raised some questioning through the years, especially its first line: “Lead us not into temptation.” Why would we need to pray this? Would God ever lead us there? It's been the question most asked me as a pastor through the years.

It was problematic for the earliest Christians who prayed it too, so much so that James, in the book of James, felt an urging to address it. He wrote:

Let no one say when tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted with evil and God tempts no one! (James 1:13)

Scholars and translators have helped with new translations: “Save us in time of trial.” Or, “When temptations come, make us strong.” Not *if* they come, *when* they come. It's part and parcel of the human condition.

Temptations are times of testing, testing most of all *who we are*. It was so in Jesus' temptations in the wilderness. He was clarifying to himself who he was and the shape of his mission in the world as the Son of God.

We remember them. The first: "If you are the son of God", the devil said, "turn these stones into bread." Would Jesus be merely a miracle-working magician? The second, "If you are the son of God, throw yourself off the pinnacle of the temple and God's angels will parachute you safely to the ground." Be spectacular. The laws of gravity and physics don't apply to you. Then the third: "If you worship me I'll give you all the kingdoms of the world!" The temptation not to serve but to rule. Jesus refused the crown offered in the wilderness, but there are many politicians and preachers ready to try it on for size. Someone quipped recently: "Christian nationalism is believing Jesus made the wrong choices in the wilderness!" Jesus would have nothing to do with these temptations.

Then Luke ends his telling of the wilderness temptations with these illuminating words:

And when the Devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him *until an opportune time*. (Luke 4:13)

That's the way with temptations, they come and come again at crucial moments. So with Jesus. Remember in the gospels when he had performed a miracle and the crowds rushed him to make him king? And he *fled* them, the text says. Or on the cross, "If you are the son of God come down from the cross!" To have done so would have betrayed the integrity of his life and ministry.

So temptations come, and when they come they arrive as choices we have to make, forks in the road that determine who we are.

Robert Frost's memorable poem, "The Road Not Taken" sets the stage for us:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

And then the famous ending of the poem:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by
And that has made all the difference.

He stood, not wanting to make a decision, wishing he could take both, but he could not be one, whole person and take both. Integrity is being one, whole person, not on the inside one, on the outside another; not one day one, the other day another.

Someone quipped, “When Baptists reach a fork in the road, they don’t fork!” Not just Baptists. Sue’s version: When Baptists reach a fork in the road, they pick it up and say, “Where’s the food?”

We cannot be one, be whole, in two places at once. We must choose, even when we cannot see all the way the path will lead. It’s called faith.

So we pray, “Abba, help us not succumb in time of testing.” Help us choose rightly.

We are drawing near the time in Jesus’ last days when he, on the night he was arrested, prayed in the garden of Gethsemane. It was an agonized prayer in the face of death:

Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Remove this cup!

Then,

But not my will, yours.

As he went into the garden to pray he had taken his three main disciples, Peter, James and John to be with him. He did not want to be alone. “Watch with me”, he said. Then as he prayed they fell fast asleep. When he turned and saw them, he said, “Could you not watch with me one hour?” And then he said words I want us to focus on: “*Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation.*” That’s at the heart of this prayer: Stay awake, keep your eyes open to temptations as they come near. Help us recognize them when they come. Watch and pray, be still—with yourself and with God.

Pascal wrote in his spiritual masterpiece, “Thoughts”, or “Pensées” these words:

I have discovered that all human evil comes from this, man’s being unable to sit still in a room.

Temptations sneak up on us. They come disguised. Sometimes disguised in beauty. Only later do we discover that we’ve lost something of ourselves as we fell for them.

So we pray, when temptations come, help us see, make up strong.

II

Now to the second part of the prayer: “But deliver us from evil.” We move cautiously. Too many people are eager to call other people evil, especially some religious folk, and too often today. I quote Pascal again:

Humankind never does evil so completely and so cheerfully as from religious conviction.

It’s so dangerous to project onto others our own shadow side, so we need to do our own shadow-side work first. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Soviet dissident and Nobel Prize winner who spent years in a Soviet gulag wrote, because he *could* sit still:

The line separating good and evil passes not through states nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through the human heart.

I want then to speak about evil on a human scale, human evil. I don’t know about supernatural evil. I’ll leave that to God. Human evil is what we have to deal with, and with that comes responsibility. Some translations of this part of the prayer go: “Deliver us from the evil one.” The personification of evil in the form of the Devil can trivialize it, make fun of it, escape responsibility for it. “The Devil made me do it”, and such.

But while I don't want to tackle supernatural evil, we should talk about *supra-personal* evil. Collective evil, the evil social institutions can inflict on others. Or social ideologies—which is a fancy word for big opinions not open to question. Like Nazism, and racism and white supremacy and male supremacy. The Spanish Inquisition of 1492, the year Columbus sailed the ocean blue, forced all Jews out of Spain unless they converted to Christianity. The Salem Witch trials created a hysteria against women and their power.

How might we recognize evil, human evil? I don't want to talk about evil people but evil actions. Cruelty is one mark: the enjoyment of de-humanizing others, and inflicting pain on them, crushing them bodily, mentally, spiritually.

Falsehood is another. For good reason the Bible called Satan “the Father of Lies.” Pervasive lies can destroy a people. Hannah Arendt wrote in the last century about the totalitarianism she experienced:

The result of consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth...but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world.... [that is] the category of truth and falsehood is being destroyed.

In another place she wrote:

This constant lie is not intended to make people believe a lie, but to make no one believe anything anymore.

The language of these last years, like “alternative facts: and “truth is relative”, have been undermining our trust in what is true and what is false. When truth goes out the window only brute power remains.

Our translation of the prayer for today goes: And deliver us from evil’s sway.” Evil has a sway that can overwhelm us, our lives and the life of our own nation.

So we call upon the help of God. “Come in haste to help us!”, the Psalmist says. We sing such a prayer in Henry Emerson Fosdick’s “God of Grace and God of Glory.”

Lo the hosts of evil round us
scorn the Christ assail his ways!
Fears and doubts too long have bound us,
free our hearts to work and praise.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage
for the living of these days.

The Psalmist of Psalm 46 lived in such times and offers us hope:

God is our refuge and strength,
 a very present help in time of trouble.
 Therefore we will not fear
 though the earth should change,
 though the mountains shake
 in the midst of the sea

Have you felt the world, your world, shaking, changing beyond your understanding? Terra firma is no longer *firma*! You may remember how you felt in the pit of your stomach when an earthquake tremor shook your house? Have you felt a kind of sea-sickness with the sudden waves, even a kind of nausea as you look at things today?

But the Psalmist won't have us give into fear, for God is our refuge and strength.

Sin is strong but God is stronger.

Stronger the right than the wrong.

Stronger the truth, the light.

Evil can have its day, but as Maya Angelou said, "Every storm runs out of water."

So the Psalmist ends:

Be still and know that I am God.

The Lord of hosts is with us.

Bishop Stephen Charleston offered these words recently:

We have all that we need for the facing of this day. We have the core strength of not being afraid of the truth. We have the resilience of those who know they will stand for what they believe. We have the support of one another. We are a global family of love rising into the light.

That's who we are.

III

And now the Lord's Prayer ends as it began, in worship. "Our Abba in heaven, hallowed be Thy name." Pure worship. And now, with the kinds of words that ended Jewish prayers in the time of Jesus:

For thine in the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever.

The kingdom, glory, power: God's! Not ours.

I love the way the KumBaYa version translates these last words:

All things come from you, all are yours

Kingdom, glory, power, all are yours

Take our lives, our gifts, all are yours.

O Lord, hear our prayer.

Let us sing it, line by line as we end our weeks with the Lord's Prayer.