**July 8, 2018**

**Luke 11:2-4**

*Lead us not into temptation... Amen.*

This week we come to the end of our immersion in the Lord’s Prayer. We have sung and prayed and thought about these familiar words for the past 6 weeks. Today we arrive at the last petition, “Lead us not into temptation.” All of the English translations used for this phrase are related to the original biblical Greek. Whether temptation or trial, evil or the evil one, the object of the phrase is clear: trouble.

This phrase is the one in the Lord’s Prayer that I have struggle to pray. These are the words that I don’t really want to say because *if* I pray “lead us not into temptation,” then I am admitting that God *might* take me into places that aren’t desirable. And this is not a God whom I want to follow. I would rather believe in and follow a God who keeps me out of trouble. I strongly believe that God is good. God’s nature and actions and very being are good, and God *seeks* good in the world. The words “lead us not into temptation” suggest that God has a mischievous streak or a trickster side that takes us creatures (who are naturally weaker than and less than God’s self) into places that might harm us or lead us astray or compromise our faith and relationship with God. Praying “lead us not into temptation” threatens to overturn my understanding of God; for as long as I can remember, I have avoided or glossed over these words. I have weakened their import and told myself that *this* isn’t really what Jesus meant. Surely Jesus meant to say that we take ourselves into temptation and trial, and that God goes with us, cleaning up our mess. Surely God is on the *other* side of temptation: the good side. Surely *God* wouldn’t lead us directly into temptation or trial, would God?

Then I think about Abraham and Isaac, when God commanded Abraham to kill his son, Isaac. God stopped Abraham after Abraham proved that he would give everything – even his beloved son Isaac – to God. That was a test of obedience, and a temptation of putting his family before God. Or what about the beginning of Jesus’ ministry when he was led into the wilderness *by the Holy Spirit*, to be tempted and tested for 40 days. That was a big test when Jesus was put face-to-face with evil. Jesus was tempted in every way. His body and mind and spirit were tested. So if God would intentionally test Abraham and Jesus – pillars of our faith – and lead others to different trials, why wouldn’t God do the same with me? It seems reasonable and likely that this actually is a way that God interacts with God’s children. The biblical evidence suggests that God tests us – all of us – and leads us beside both still *and* choppy waters, in green and overgrown pastures.

This is not a welcome realization. I actually feel a little betrayed that God would intentionally take me into trouble. What’s the point of this? Isn’t there an easier way? What if I don’t know that I’m in a testing situation? What if I don’t do the right thing? What if I give in to temptation instead of proving my faith on sure and steady ground?

The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians that “No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and won’t let you be tested beyond your strength.” [[1]](#footnote-1) So the good news is that even if God *does* lead people into times of testing and temptation, God stays with us in the midst of these trials and temptations. God does not want us to drown in the choppy waters, but to prove our strength and mettle. God wants us to fight for our faith, and feel the weight of the decisions we make *because of* our discipleship. The life we lead as children of God, the decisions we make as disciples of Christ, these should be different from the actions and choices of those who do not follow God.

C.S. Lewis wrote: “Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of an army by fighting against it, not by giving in. you find out the strength of a wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down… That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness – they have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Being tempted and tested helps us learn about ourselves. We learn our strengths and weaknesses. We learn who and what is not God, and why we need God.

“Lead us not into temptation” is a prayer for mercy – that God would be gentle taking us into difficult places. It is also a prayer for strength – that God would guide us and give us what we need to navigate life’s trials and temptations.

If we try to fight against the evil and temptation around us with only our own strength and devices, we will lose every time. So we follow this petition by asking God to “deliver us from evil.” We need our holy Father and daily sustainer to also be our Savior. Do not lead us into temptation, then leave us in the whelming flood. Do not take us onto shaky ground, then ask us to save ourselves. No, God, we need you to be our protector and deliverer.

Deliver us from the natural evils that threaten us – cancer, diseases, hurricanes, wind, and fire. Deliver us from the societal evils that oppress us – poverty and hunger and prostitution and crime. Deliver us from the evil that dances within our own hearts and minds – bigotry and racism and greed and selfishness. O God, deliver us. Not just me from my temptations and trials and evils, deliver us all from our struggles.

Even to this last petition, God reminds us that we are not alone. We are part of the “us” that who are God’s children. And we all need God’s guidance and protection. We need God’s wisdom and God’s salvation.

The Lord’s Prayer simply and profoundly carries us through the complexity of who God is, and the breadth and depth of our humanity. French philosopher, Simone Weil, believed that all prayers written after the Lord’s Prayer are already contained therein. These few words contain everything we can and need to pray. It is praise of God’s good and holy being. It is prayer for the world. It is confession of our sinfulness. It is desire to walk closely to God.

It is understandable that these are the words faithful people pray their whole lives, every day, every week, on their knees in desperation, and with joy in celebration. And it makes sense that these are the words people pray when they don’t know how to pray, or don’t even think that they really *believe* in God, but are faced with a situation that prompts them to reconnect with the Divine. There are countless stories of parents in emergency rooms, children in schools, and soldiers in battle who surprise themselves by praying, “Our Father, give us… forgive us… lead us not… deliver us…”

Although Jesus concluded his prayer with these words, we usually finish the Lord’s Prayer with a glorious doxology: “for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,” then end with a resounding “Amen!” After professing God’s name and holiness, after asking for sustenance and forgiveness and guidance, we say, “amen” which means, “let it be.” Let all of this come to pass. “Amen” is a seal on our prayer. It is a final word of confidence, said with heads held high; we know what we pray for is already among us—God’s name is hallowed, God’s kingdom is coming, God’s will is done on earth as in heaven, and God gives us strength to endure temptation and resist evil. Now we finish with a word of hope for what we do not know or understand: may this prayer be heard. May God respond, and may we be changed.

Amen.

1. 1 Corinthians 10:13 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lewis, C.S. Mere Christianity. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)