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Luke 4: 1-13
Matthew 6: 9-13

Lord's Prayer: Part 5
“And Lead Us Not Into Temptation”

“Show me where God is, and I will give you a gold coin,” the student challenged his teacher. After pausing only long enough to draw a breath, his teacher responded, “And I will give you **two** gold coins, if you show me where **God is not.**”

This little tale from the Jewish tradition witnesses to a foundational principle of covenant theology: and that is that God is always with us. There is no where we can go to escape God. As the psalmist says, “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? 8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. 9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, 10 even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.” (Psalm 139)

Judeo-Christian faith affirms that God is personally present to us in all times and circumstances; that there is no place, no tragedy, no heartbreak, no situation good or bad, where God is not present.

The Bible is full of God's promise to be with us. From the very beginning in the book of Genesis, when God promises Abraham, “I will be your God and you will be my people”, to the very end in the book of Revelation, when the vision of a new heaven and a new earth promises that “in death, crying and pain will be no more, and God will wipe every tear from our eyes,” God's steadfast presence is assured. And in between these two bookends we read story after story of God staying with the people no matter how dumb the people are or how mad at them God is; and we hear Jesus say to so many “Do not fear, for I am with you” and to the disciples “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Of course, anyone who has spent much time reading the Bible also knows that God's presence doesn't protect us from or inoculate us against life's

troubles. To paraphrase another well know psalm, we will undoubtedly spend some time in the valley of the shadow of death. We will face times of trial.

But does God lead us into times of trial?

That's the question the Lord's Prayer begs when we pray week in and week out, "Lead us not into temptation."

Does God lead us into times of trial or temptation?

All week I kept bumping up against this part of the prayer, "And lead us not into temptation," asking myself, "Does God lead us into temptation." So much of what I read said no, of course not, God would never lead us into temptation, and then went to quote the Book of James, "But no one, when tempted, should say, 'I am being tempted by God; for God tempts no one . . . One is tempted by one's own desire.'"

But From the very beginning the church has been bothered by these words, which seem to say that yes, indeed, God can lead us into temptation and God is even predisposed to do that. Why else would we need to ask God to do otherwise?

Through the centuries people have done their best to rewrite Matthew's words to soften them. The earliest attempt to do so was pre-4th century and translated his words to say, "Do not permit us to be led into temptation." One of the latest attempts to soften Matthew's words was in 1989, when the Anglican Church adopted an alternative Lord's Prayer that replaced "Lead us not into temptation" with "Save us from the time of trial."

My hunch is we fiddle with the language so that it suits our beliefs because we don't want to believe God leads us into temptation. We want to protect God. We don't want to believe that God is confrontational or at all challenging. So we swaddle God in bubble wrap.

And there are plenty of Biblical stories to lead us to believe that God would never intentionally lead us into temptation.

But there's also Biblical witness to back up the belief that God leads us into temptation. In Job, we have the devil testing Job because God permitted it. And in the New Testament we have the Spirit of God driving Jesus into the wilderness where he will face 40 days of the devil's temptations. Now, some will say that in these stories it wasn't God doing the tempting, it was the devil. And that may be; but we still have the problem of God allowing the temptation to take place.

So what do we do with these stories when they don't suit our beliefs? Do we just toss them aside as ancient relics of the past, or an editorial error?

Well, you know we Presbyterians can't do that. I've said it before and I will say it again, the believing in the authority of scripture means we take the bad with the good; we can't pick and choose which stories to believe and which ones not to believe. But we can look at the whole of scripture through a single interpretative lens. And for us that usually means looking at scripture through the eyes of Jesus and asking, "What would Jesus do?"

When we look at the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, we see Jesus resisting the devil's charms and choosing to trust God instead. And despite what we may think, that wasn't easy for Jesus to do, because succumbing to the devil's temptations would have served the people well.

The first temptation, to turn a stone into a loaf of bread, would have meant Jesus could have fed a lot of hungry people. Israel's landscape was littered with stones. Israel was also littered with many hungry citizens. Jesus could have fed Israel's inhabitants 100 times over, which would have been a good thing considering the land was wracked by famine.

The second temptation the devil tries to lure Jesus with is to have authority over all the world's kingdoms. Again, had Jesus succumbed to this temptation, the people would have benefitted. Remember, most of the known world in Jesus' day was under the heavy-handed control of Rome. A regime change would have been good for the people.

The third temptation concludes in Jerusalem, where the devil challenges Jesus to go there and challenge the priests' work, many of whom are working hand-in-hand with the Roman occupiers to the detriment of the people. Surely a reform is in order there.

Yet to each of these temptations Jesus says, “No.” Jesus knows that while accepting the temptation would have served the world well in the short run, accepting them would have meant serving something and someone less than God which in the long run, would have been very detrimental and would have served no one but himself.

When we think about our own temptations, we tend to think of those small temptations we face consciously every day: the extra cookie we know we shouldn’t eat, the dress we purchased but cannot afford, the questionable tax deduction we took, or even the little white lie we told. But the biggest temptation we face isn’t any of those, it’s the temptation to secure our future on our own terms instead of God’s terms.

And unfortunately, we don’t need to look far to see this played out in the world.

We see more and more politicians accept the temptation of winning the next election instead of getting something done. We see them compromising the well-being of many in order to comfort a few. We see companies cut corners that will hurt the environment in order to gain a few bucks. And every day we see people secure their own future first and if there’s enough left over to secure someone else’s, well OK then and if not, well OK then. What are we taught on airplanes? Put your own mask on before assisting others with theirs.

May I suggest that Jesus lived his life doing the opposite, and expects us to do the same?

You see, the important question isn’t, “Who leads us into temptation?”, but when we’re faced with it will we succumb to the temptation of securing our own mask first, or will we live like Jesus and secure the masks of others before ourselves? That, I think, is the important question.

I’ve come to the conclusion that when we pray “lead us not into temptation”, we’re summing up every other petition in this prayer; that’s how important this petition is.

Give us this day our daily bread. Let’s not be tempted to forget to bring bread to those who are physically and spiritually hungry. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Let’s not be tempted to be unforgiving

people. Hallowed be thy name. Let's not be tempted to hallow power and success at the expense of other people.

At the very beginning of this series I said that the Lord's Prayer is both radical and political. It's radical in the sense that we are praying for things that are entirely counter-cultural, like securing other people's masks before our own -- and political in the sense that we are called to make it happen, not just talk about it.

In a prison camp in World War II, on a cold, dark evening after a series of beatings, after the hundreds of prisoners of war had been marched before the camp commander and harangued for an hour, when the prisoners were returned to their dark barracks and told to be quiet for the rest of the night, someone, somewhere in one of the barracks began saying the Lord's Prayer. Some of his fellow prisoners lying next to him began to pray with him.

Their prayer was overheard by prisoners in the next building who joined them. One by one, each set of barracks joined in the prayer until, as the prayer was ending with, "Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory," hundreds of prisoners had joined their voices in a strong, growing, defiant prayer, reaching a thunderous, "Amen!"

And then the camp was silent, but not before the tables had been turned, the prisoners had thrown off their chains, and a new world had been sighted, signaled, and stated.

Since the day that Jesus taught this prayer, Wherever it has been prayed, even in the darkest of days and the worst of situations, prisoners have been set free, the blind see, the lame walk, the poor have good news proclaimed to them, and a new world, not otherwise available to us, has been constituted. As the great theologian Karl Barth said, "To clasp hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world."

May it always be so, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.

Amen.

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