**“Lead Us”**

Rev. Clinton G. Roberts First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest Matthew 6:13 April 3, 2022

On Tuesday mornings at 9:30 am, the Staff of First Pres. sits down in the Great Room to look at the work we are doing and the calendar for the weeks ahead, discussing any matters of common interest or concern. One matter of common concern comes up at just about every meeting right around 10:00 am, when a man walks into the Great Room with a devilish grin, carrying one or more large boxes containing things like peanut butter cookies, shortbread, chocolate-covered cookies, pound cake, cherry cobbler, banana cake, brownies, or blueberry pie.

At this point, I feel that the focus of our meetings begin to waver. I watch, salivating, as the man sets down his temptations on the coffee table before me. *“Should I continue?”* I ask myself hypocritically, as all the faces in the room are now focused exclusively on that table, their eyes glassily fixed, their mouths already opening with anticipation. *“Shall we pause for* *refreshment?”* I ask coyly, as the Staff rushes to the coffee table like a pride of lions covering their prey on the plains of the Serengeti. So much for self control!

I

Our subject for this morning is temptation and deliverance: the Sixth and last Petition of the Lord’s Prayer. If the Fourth Petition regarding daily bread has to do with the present; and the Fifth Petition regarding forgiveness has to do with the past; the Sixth Petition has to do with the future, perhaps in light of those very same failures we have just asked God to forgive. *“And lead us not into temptation,”* we pray. But unlike the previous five petitions, this raises a troubling question: *“Does God actually do that?”*

Back in the Book of Genesis, we find the first Man and the first Woman in the Garden of Eden—sinless and innocent of what is evil and good. They live in bliss under God’s provision, with only one commandment to secure their free will: *Do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*

As the story is told, there is a serpent in the garden, identified with Satan in the Book of Revelation. The serpent lies to the woman, assuring her that if she eats the fruit of the tree, she will become the equal of God: she will know good and evil, and she will not die. The woman is tempted by the lies of the serpent and chooses to act upon them. She takes hold of the alluring fruit and eats—and the man does also. Did the serpent coerce them to do this? No—they did it themselves. They come to a very sudden realization of good and evil, captured by their shame in being naked. They have disobeyed God’s will, lost their innocence, and fallen under the dominion of sin and death. The serpent, not God, leads them into temptation. But they act out of their own free will.

In the New Testament, it is Jesus himself who is led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, right after God has named him his Beloved Son in the waters of his baptism. We are told he was *“led by the Spirit”* into this forty-day time of testing. But it is the devil who does the tempting—not God. Part of the tension between ‘testing’ and ‘tempting’ is that the Bible uses the same word to describe them both.

The three temptations which Jesus faced in the wilderness are strikingly reflected in the Lord’s Prayer.

1. The first, *“Command these stones to become bread.”* The Lord’s Prayer says, *“Give us this day our daily bread.”*
2. The second, *“Throw yourself down,”* is answered, *“You shall not tempt the Lord your God.”* In the Lord’s Prayer, it says, *“And lead us not into temptation.”*
3. The third, *“He showed him all the kingdoms of the world,”* is answered by the Lord’s Prayer, *“Your kingdom come.”*

The six petitions of this Prayer cover all the temptations Jesus himself faced, which perhaps is why he taught it to us. Like our own baptism and the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, it is a means of grace.

II

But some of you may still be wondering, *“If God is all-powerful and knows everything, and temptation comes my way (like chocolate cookies), isn’t God somehow culpable? Isn’t God tempting me? What happens if I fail?”* In the Book of James, it 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”* (James 1:13-15). There is no evil in God. And while God can bring good out of any and all situations, God does not employ evil to do so. Temptations have to do with sin—and God does not lead us into it. *“Temptation is a part of the human condition,”* says Adam Hamilton in his book on the Lord’s Prayer. *“The question is not whether we will be tempted, but how we will respond when temptation comes.”* God knows our condition—but God doesn’t set us up to fail. Our own fears and desires lure and entice us; and when we lie—we lie to ourselves. *“I don’t have a drinking problem—I can stop anytime…I’m never envious…I’m an open-minded person…I’m in control of what I eat!”* And so on. And so on. And so on.

No—God isn’t the one deluding us. We do that to ourselves. Or this does: these modern “Apples”—these smartphones we can’t live without which have become conduits of knowing both the evil and the good.

Martin Luther said that people can be righteous and sinful at one and the same time. Paul puts it this way in Romans: *“I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do”* (Rom. 7:18-19). This is what it means to be human. God isn’t setting us up for failure. As it says in the 23rd Psalm, God leads us on right paths: paths that bring us in time to green pastures and still waters, because God loves us. It is God who restores our lost and sin-sick souls.

III

The second half of the Sixth Petition states, *“But deliver us from evil.”* In the original Greek, it says literally *“the evil,”* which supports the NRSV translation *“the evil one.”* This is probably a reference to the devil—the personification of evil—but it can also mean someone who is doing evil, such as those who unleash great suffering and destruction of life in this world. *“Lord—deliver us from them.”*

For my part, whether you personify evil as a being willfully at work in this world, prowling around “*like a lion looking for someone to devour*,” as it says in 1 Peter; or whether you perceive evil to be embedded in our laws and social structures, or whether you look for the origin of evil within the human heart—it’s probably not a bad idea to ask God to deliver you from all of the above. *“Deliver”* in this case means literally to *“snatch up, grasp or lift out of harm’s way,”* like a parent who sweeps up her child before she toddles out into the street.

*Conclusion*

But if God doesn’t “tempt” us—what about “testing” us? In English, these two words mean very different things. The adventure of living carries with it any number of tests, doesn’t it? Some are moral, such as *“Will I take what does not belong to me? Will I advance myself at the expense of others? Will I tell the truth?”* Other tests work differently. *“Will I expend myself for the sake of others? Will I finish this race? Will I keep the faith?”*

Friends, times of testing will come to all of us, and sooner or later, we must all walk through our dark valleys. The final Petition of the Lord’s Prayer reminds us that in these moments of trial and uncertainty, we are not alone. *“You are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort and protect me. Goodness and Mercy walk on my right side and my left, and you are leading me home.”* In the prayer known as St. Patrick’s Breastplate, isn’t this what we affirm?

*“Christ behind me, Christ before me…Christ to comfort and restore me.”*

In the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul urges us to *“Put on the whole armor of God”* when battling the evil that lies around and within us. When evil days come, he urges us to stand firm. When faced with evil and temptation, he reminds us that we are not defenseless.

* We have the truth to belt around us;
* And Christ’s righteousness to cover our hearts.
* We have our faith to shield us from temptation and despair;
* And a helmet of salvation to keep our minds focused on where we’re going.
* We have shoes to run the race that is set before us;
* And the sword of the Spirit to defend us and attack what is evil.

Look at that stained-glass window over there. That sword being offered to you is the word of God.

Paul has the best commentary of all regarding the meaning of the Sixth Petition, found in 1 Corinthians 10:13: *“No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you can endure it.”*

In the end, Adam Hamilton is right in saying that in all six Petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, *“We are asking God to lead us, as opposed to leading ourselves.”* Are you ready to ask for that? To pray, “*And lead us (full stop!) not into temptation but through it and over it and beyond it…because you, God, are our Deliverer. You have led us faithfully through everything. You have raised us up with wings like eagles; and through your Son have delivered us from the grip of sin and death.*

*Lead us now, Lord. Lead us still.*

*For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours; now and forever. Amen.*