

LEAD US INTO TEMPTATION?

We all know the Lord's Prayer, right? And we know the part that mentions temptation. "Lead us not into temptation." Who could disagree with that? I imagine that most of us would rather not be led into tempting situations. I'm also guessing that it's hard for us to believe God would want to put us in the crosshairs of temptation. And yet, the prayer that Jesus taught his followers to pray includes the petition, "Lead us not into temptation."

In other words, when we recite the Lord's Prayer, a portion of it says to God, "Lord, you know my weaknesses. You know the things I'm likely to give in to that aren't good for me: actions, thoughts and attitudes that hurt me or hurt others, are contrary to your will, and estrange me from you. So please keep me away from such temptations!"

Now, here's a question I'd like you to ponder. Is temptation always a bad thing? Let me ask it another way. Are experiences that put our faith and put our resolve to follow Christ to the test something we should always avoid?

The first thing that grabs our attention in this morning's reading from Matthew's Gospel is that Jesus didn't avoid his time of testing. In fact, the story is told in a way that it makes me wonder whether Jesus could have avoided it even if he wanted to. Matthew and Luke's Gospel say that Jesus, after his baptism by John, was led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Mark uses an even more vivid word. His Gospel says that the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness. It sounds like, according to Mark, the Spirit basically pushed Jesus, shoved Jesus into the wilderness so he could face the test the devil wanted to put him through.

It would seem that, according to Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus' baptism and his affirmation from God that "This is my beloved Son," weren't enough to equip him to be God's Messiah. There also had to be a time of testing. There needed to be a time when Jesus confronted the things that threatened to distract him from his ministry, undermine his dependence on God, do his ministry his way instead of God's way, and say "yes" or "no" to them.

It seems God wanted Jesus to encounter the things that were a danger to his mission, face them head on, and overcome any power they had over him. In that sense, being testing, being tempted, was necessary so the ministry of Jesus

could start off on the right foot. We know this because it was God's own Holy Spirit who led him into the wilderness to be tempted.

I should say at this point that this story only makes sense if we understand that Jesus was truly tempted, as we are almost every day. Jesus was fully human. He wasn't just going through the motions of being tested, with no chance of him ever giving in to those temptations. Jesus could have failed the test. Jesus was famished when the devil told him to turn those stones into bread. Imagine if you hadn't eaten for a day or two—let alone forty days as Jesus had—and your hunger burned within you, and the tempter led you to a table laid out with a feast with your favorite food, whatever that favorite food was. Wouldn't you be strongly tempted to eat, even with the stipulation that you had to first do something you knew went against God's will?

Of course, and so did Jesus! After forty days of fasting in the desert, I imagine a loaf or two of bread would have looked like a virtual feast to our Lord. The Tempter was offering food to a starving man, and all that man had to do was give in. But Jesus refused to listen to the voice within him that wanted to lead him away from God and God's will. And those other temptations—to base his ministry on spectacular acts and miracles that would impress people and feed his ego, rather than using his gifts of healing and divine power to lead people to God; and seeking power and glory for himself, rather than living his life only so that God alone would be glorified—those temptations were also very real to Jesus. But he resisted them, and his faith and spiritual strength grew because of it.

This story of Jesus temptation makes me wonder. Now I don't think we should intentionally seek out or put ourselves in temptation's way. "Here I am. Come and get me; give it your best shot." Obviously that wouldn't be a very smart thing for us to do. But I do wonder if there are times when the Spirit of God leads us into temptation moments, or at least allows us to fall into them, in order to make us and our faith stronger in the end.

You see, in those moments of temptation, we come face to face with the things inside us that threaten to lead us away from God. During our times in the wilderness, we're forced to confront a side of ourselves that can weaken our faith and our faithfulness. But a deeper awareness of our shadow side, and confronting the temptation to give in to that shadow side, can draw us closer to God and so make our relationship with God and love for God stronger. In that context, temptation might be good, and maybe even necessary for us. And our struggles and fights against temptation could be an important part of what the season of Lent is all about.

You have probably noticed that, for a couple of months or so now, I've been preaching to you in a different way. Instead of staying up in the pulpit and reading from a manuscript, I have been coming down here with you and preaching without any notes. I liken this way of preaching to walking a tightrope. Every time I preach to you in this extemporaneous way, I always say a prayer beforehand that I won't fall off the tightrope and fail in a spectacular fashion. My biggest fear is that I will come down here, look out at all of you, and draw a complete blank about what I planned on saying.

Ever since I have been preaching this way, my weekends have changed. Beginning around Friday night and leading right up until Sunday morning when I come down here to preach, I experience a powerful temptation. I'm greatly tempted to go back to my old way of preaching using a manuscript. Take my word for it, it's a whole lot easier to read a sermon off a manuscript than to preach a sermon down here without any manuscript for security.

So I confess that every weekend, as Sunday draws closer, a little voice in my head begins to speak to me. In a gentle, well-meaning, non-judgmental manner, this voice tells me I don't have to continue preaching like this. Why not take the easy way out and just read what you wrote? You don't need the stress and pressure of trying to remember the talking points of your sermon, so chill out. Relax. And don't worry. The congregation loves you; they won't judge or criticize you if you go back to your old way of preaching.

Seriously, it's a very strong temptation. Although I enjoy preaching this way, and I enjoy the freedom it gives me, I don't enjoy the stress and anxiety I feel and the time it takes preparing to preach this way.

Now, please don't misunderstand. I'm not saying the voice I hear, encouraging me to take the easier path of preaching, is in any way demonic. But, as happened with Jesus, who was tempted to take the easy way out in his ministry and use his gifts in a self-serving way, I'm tempted to take the easy way out, too. But I've also noticed that every time that little voice tempts me to go back to my old way of preaching, God does something to reassure me that this way of sharing the Gospel, down here without notes, is the right way, the way God wants me to go.

I'll give you an example. Several weeks ago I was handed this small, very brief note. I don't know who wrote it, and actually I don't think I really want to know who did because if it remains anonymous I can imagine that it came from any one of you—and that the note speaks for all of you. The note I'm referring to is actually a prayer, and it says, "Lord, thank you for a pastor willing to grow to the

end. Amen.”

I keep this note in my office where I can look at it whenever I'm anxious and need reassurance. And I remember and think about this prayer whenever I hear that voice in my head tempting me to follow the easier way of preaching. I consider this to be a word from the Lord, telling me I'm on the right path, and I should stay the course and God will see me through.

One last thing. The more I resist the temptation to go back to the way I used to preach and continue to depend on the Holy Spirit rather than on my sermon notes, the stronger and more competent I feel doing it. And I think my struggles with that temptation is helping to improve my preaching and enriching my ministry to you.

My friends, I would never suggest or encourage you to ask God, “Lead me into temptation.” But what if we made this Lenten season a time for us to face our temptations head on, the way Jesus did, and empty ourselves of the things in our life that get in the way of our relationship with God? What if we made this Lent a time of resisting the temptation to take the easier path through the wilderness, and instead walk the more difficult path, trusting that God will see us through as he saw Jesus through? If we did that, I think we would come to the end of these next forty days with a stronger spirit, a deeper faith, and a closer relationship with God, just as it did for Jesus.

So, my prayer for us this morning is, “Dear Lord, keep us from the trials and temptations of life. But if there comes a time when you allow it, don't let it defeat us. Instead, let it strengthen us for our ministry in Christ's name. Amen.