

April 3rd, 2009
Lead Us Not Into Temptation
Mark 6: 5-15
St. Philip's Episcopal Church
Brevard NC ecumenical service
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Here at St. Philip's we have a few small groups who gather weekly for centering prayer. Centering prayer is a contemplative prayer practice where one sits for twenty minutes in silence and releases all the words and thoughts and deeds that course through us in a day. We end each sit with one member of the group slowly reciting the Lord's Prayer, phrase by phrase. It's a kind of lectio divina, a form of bible study, where we notice the nuance of each word. It's good to do now and then with texts we know by heart and tend to rattle off too fast. It's a way to give prayer and scripture the attention it deserves.

This week at centering prayer, knowing that I needed to speak a few words today, I paused at "lead us not into temptation," I found myself thinking, "WHAT?" The words hit me: if you break the prayer into short little sound bites, it sounds like Jesus taught us to ask God to refrain from leading us into temptation. What a weird theological statement, as though God is some Cosmic Scary Stranger who's just waiting around the corner, rubbing His hands and offering us candy. "C'mere little girl," He growls. "I got some caaaaandy for ya!"

Is Jesus actually suggesting that God does lead us into temptation? Is Jesus saying, "God knows that we're grabby little creatures – God, in fact, gave us those qualities so that we would be hungry for knowledge, for justice and for wisdom – but those same awesome qualities can turn bad on us, so we have to also ask God not to lead us toward that which God created for us?" Surely not, that doesn't make sense. It's good to question assumptions that we make about scripture, questions take us deeper, so let's dive a little deeper into this tempting sound bite.

In the Anglican Communion we have an Archbishop, of Canterbury (in England,) who is first among equals. The Anglican Communion is a collection of national churches around the world who say common prayers together, many of the countries were originally British Colonies. In the United States and its territories, the national Anglican church is the Episcopal Church. The ABC is not our pope, we don't have a pope. The Archbishop of Canterbury is a bishop who has been chosen by other bishops to preside (not govern) over the Anglican Communion. His name is Rowan Williams. He is a scholar, a quiet thinking man, a prolific writer. This is what he says about temptation.

Rowan Williams suggests that first, always, we must approach scripture in the context of Jesus' own day. Jesus' journey toward Jerusalem always carries a consistent message.

Jesus' teaching often turns back to this idea that a great time of trial is coming. A time when we shall find out what we're really capable of. As we often say you don't know what someone's made of until they're under pressure. Jesus is saying, "We're coming towards a time when you really have to decide how much God matters to you; you really have to put your life on the line." Jesus says this over and over again as he predicts his own death.

Now the words "lead us not into temptation" don't quite capture the essence of all of that because temptation for us usually tends to mean just a sort of impulse to do unworthy or sinful things. But temptation goes far deeper than that.

I'm sure all of us have endured trials. All of us have moved through periods of angst and fear for what lies ahead. We've all found ourselves in the Garden of Gethsemane. Our hour of darkness takes many forms: job losses, illness, injury, or death of a loved one. When confronted with trials, our first response is to worry about what lies ahead. Our temptation is to worry forward. How will I get through this? What if the worst happens? What if I don't have what I need to survive this trial? It's all conjecture of course, we haven't lived through it yet, but we certainly can imagine the worst.

Jesus says to us, don't assume you know the answers. Don't assume you know what's going to happen. Don't assume you know how much you're capable of doing or not doing. Pray that when the time of trial comes, when things get really difficult, you will have the resources and strength to meet it. You will be led.

Temptation means so much more in the context of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. It means this huge trial is coming, this huge crisis appears to be looming. Lead us not into the temptations of fear, don't, please God don't push us into the time of crisis before you've made us ready for it. Don't push us until you've given us what we need to face it, deliver us oh Lord from evil.

I've been through a few trials of my own. There have been years where all I had was the strength to get through that moment, and then another moment would arrive and somehow I'd get through that. I couldn't think ahead toward what was to come, all I had the strength for was contained within that moment. To make plans seemed to be an arrogant assumption

on my part. Especially when the news seemed to be getting worse, not better. Then slowly I began to realize that by grace I had all that I needed for that one moment, and then another moment would arrive, and with the arrival of the next moment, again, I had all that I needed, by grace. I couldn't guess what would happen next, but I could trust that what I needed would arrive. When the time of trial came on in full force, when things became difficult beyond my imagination. I did have the resources (and strength) to meet it. They came, angels of grace, who brought all that I needed in my hour of need, gifts beyond my imagination. I didn't summon those graces, they come freely via the Holy Spirit, through the hands and hearts of real people.

The Lord's Prayer is a good prayer to pray, because for each one of us there are times of crisis when we discover what we're made of. In some seasons those crises are wretched, and we know we're not up to it. But we're given all that we need in each moment as those moments string together into the strand of pearls which is our life in the making.

It's a good simple prayer, our Lord's Prayer. God, give us what we need to face the crisis when it comes and please God don't bring us toward that crisis too soon.

Lead us into not into Temptation is forever connected to the phrase which follows it. Deliver us from evil, set us free. Set us free from all those things, the fears, the sins, our own selfish habits which keep us imprisoned, away from You, and render us unable to face our very own tempering crisis.

So lead us Lord, lead us. ...not into temptation, the path we imagine for ourselves and so frequently choose to go down. Lead us..... away from all of that. Not into temptation, ... but deliver us from evil.

*Save us from the time of trial,
And deliver us from evil.
For the Kingdom, the power,
And the glory are yours,
Now and for ever.
Amen.*