

“Resist with Purpose”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Luke 4: 1-13

In the Lord’s Prayer, we ask God “lead us not into temptation.” It is a peculiar request, because it assumes that God might be willing to do just that – lead us into temptation. That seems like a faulty assumption. After all, if God wants us to be faithful, if God wants us to be righteous and sinless, then why would God lead us into temptation? Yet we do pray that phrase, just as Jesus taught us, and when we consider the source, the reason why becomes clear.

“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.” Lead us not into temptation. Jesus had a reason for teaching us to pray that phrase. He knew from personal experience that sometimes the Spirit may lead us to wilderness places where temptation is rife.

The Spirit doesn’t do that to tempt us. The Spirit leads us to the wilderness for a whole variety of holy reasons. Jesus was led there immediately after his baptism and prior to the inauguration of his official ministry, presumably for a period of reflection and preparation. And we too occasionally find ourselves in a wilderness of sorts.

In this wilderness great good may happen. We can discover new meaning, about God and our own selves. We can penetrate the veil of deception and uncover hidden truth. A friend of mine who likes to go hiking and camping says, “I come back from the mountains, Michael, and I know what is real again.”

But the wilderness, for all the good it may do us, also provides an opportunity for temptation to assail us. The same thing that makes the wilderness so valuable also makes it dangerous. The disorientation we experience may frighten us into hasty decisions that can result in terrible consequences. Just as we may find ourselves and God in the wilderness, we can also lose ourselves to temptation there.

And yet Jesus did not teach us to pray “lead us not into the wilderness.” We are meant to go there from time to time, especially in crucial moments of our lives as individuals and as a community. But how can we make that journey into the wilderness without being led into temptation? Well, first, it helps to know what type of temptation we might face in the wilderness.

Temptation usually starts small and practical. “Command this stone to become bread.” Try not eating for forty days and see how vulnerable you’d be to that one. No doubt, Jesus could have done it. And what harm would it have caused? He was out there by himself, no witnesses except the devil. It almost seems stubborn that Jesus wouldn’t help himself in this way. His fast was over; time to break the fast and chow down. Why not turn the stones into bread? Because the devil suggested it? Maybe that’s a good enough reason to refuse, but I believe Jesus had an even better reason.

The devil had issued a challenge, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.” The devil demanded Jesus to prove himself. Again, why not? Had Jesus done so, the devil would have had little room to deny him, and but He already knew who Jesus was. That’s why he was out there in the first place. Instead, the devil was trying to trick Jesus into betraying himself, his mission, and his father by misusing his power.

How would turning stone to bread be a misuse of power? Well, the miraculous capacity of Jesus was intended not for his own self-gratification. That power was intended to help others and to help them primarily by serving as a witness to his identity as Messiah. At first glance, it wouldn't appear terribly selfish for Jesus to have used that power in a practical way to meet his physical needs, but remember had he succumbed to temptation, this would have been his first recorded use of those remarkable powers. A miracle performed, not to heal others or feed them; a miracle with no witnesses; a miracle expended for a comparatively modest and selfish purpose, one that would not have accorded with the true purpose of that remarkable power. Turning the stones into bread would have been sinful, because it would have sacrificed what is right upon the dark altar of what is convenient.

This is what Jesus meant by the cryptic response, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" Jesus was quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, and the second half of that verse says, "but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." In other words, Jesus felt that the true substance of his life was sustained by spiritual nourishment, and that nourishment consisted of obedience to God. This does not deny his very real need for food, but it places as a higher priority fidelity to his mission. Jesus would not allow his first miracle to be self-serving, because that was not the proper purpose of the miraculous power he possessed. Jesus would not sacrifice what is right for what is convenient, and neither should we.

As we travel through the wilderness, we will be tempted to do things easy, cheap, and conveniently, in order to alleviate our suffering and anxiety. Doing things that way will skew our proper priorities and betray our mission. We must resist as Jesus did, for

the power God pours into us is too precious to be expended in an unworthy way. We need to use the gifts God has given us in ways that abide by God's Will. Every resource – spiritual and material – is called into God's service, for we belong to the Lord and not ourselves alone.

Yes, temptation usually starts out small and practical. Prove yourself. Satisfy your hunger. Sacrifice what is right on the altar of convenience. Betray your mission. Deny your purpose. Reprioritize. Small and practical temptations can lead to surprisingly dangerous consequences. Unfortunately, temptation is not always small and practical.

The devil tried three times with Jesus, before he retired to wait for a more opportune moment. The first temptation was small and practical, the second two grandiose. Temptation #2 offered Jesus authority over all the kingdoms of the Earth; global domination, and yet Jesus refused.

Again, we may find ourselves frustrated. If Jesus had only taken the devil up on that offer, we might be living in a peaceful world, dominated by the law of love. Except that love and domination don't go together. Accepting the scepter of worldly rule would have undermined the work of love Jesus came to do. It would have also tacitly acknowledged the devil's power over creation, a power the devil claimed falsely, for the creation belongs to God alone. The devil offered what he didn't have to give, in an attempt to get Jesus to worship him. And Jesus called his bluff, saying, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

The lessons for us here are twofold. First, embracing a grandiose vision of domination will lead us to betray the very message of love God wants us to bring to the

world. Domination and love are incompatible realities. Some of our brothers and sisters in Christ have forgotten that. These advocates of “dominion theology” believe God has called them to establish a theocracy in our nation that will require everyone to adhere to their version of the Christian faith. They have succumbed to temptation, and we must be aware of the threat they pose and resist their agenda by praying for them.

The second lesson is that the creation belongs to God, and God has never surrendered ownership of it. God has made us stewards of creation, but not owners. We often try to derive power from worldly sources, but most of those sources offer what they cannot deliver, just as the devil tempted Jesus with something not his to give. However, God will deliver power to those faithful to God’s purposes.

In the third temptation, the devil tempts Jesus to do something spectacular, namely jump off the Temple roof, in order to prove who he is. At first glance, this diabolical temptation seems harmless. After all, Jesus will soon do miracles much more impressive than simply bungee-jumping without a cord. But again, it comes down to purpose.

What positive result would issue forth from such a death-defying stunt? Amazement. Entertainment. Perhaps some people would have been convinced by this remarkable feat that there was something special about Jesus. But no one would walk away healed or forgiven or fed or taught. A grandiose stunt like jumping off the top of the Temple would have served no Godly purpose, and so Jesus refused, as must we.

It’s tough to decline the temptation to be flashy, because that’s the world we live in: sensationalistic reality shows; media circuses. Life in the 21st Century is about being spectacular, a compound word from the same roots that form “spectator” and “ocular.”

Spectacular literally means “something for others to look at.” We may be tempted to be spectacular, but faith comes by hearing. We need people to listen to the story of Jesus. That’s our purpose. And we need people to be motivated to participate, not just look at us. Christianity is not a spectator faith.

Now our witness may cause amazement, (in fact, it has) and sometimes our witness is a visual phenomenon. Many people come to faith in Jesus by seeing how Christians are different in an attractive way, and they want to experience the same transformation, feel the same love and peace that makes a faithful Christian distinct. But that witness is rarely ever spectacular.

The Christian witness is about a daily life well lived. It’s about small acts of mercy and kindness that accumulate over time to alter the world we live in. It’s about an attitude toward life that shines through and lifts up and promises hope. The spectacular may happen, but it is so rare, we should beware, because when the spectacular appears, it is more often than not a sign that temptation has won.

People go to the wilderness for many reasons. Some are led there; others wander into it; still more rush to be there for the solitude offered by it. And yet we are never alone in the wilderness. Temptation dwells there, and so does God. It is for us to choose, when we find ourselves in the wilderness, to resist temptation and remain faithful.

Discernment is essential, for temptation is tricky. But most of all, we must be clear about God’s true purpose for us as a community, and for each of us individually. That also requires careful, prayerful discernment. Knowing God’s purpose will help us choose what is right. What we cannot do is refuse to choose, for to not decide is to have

decided. Jesus instructs to pray “lead us not into temptation.” Nowhere does he tell us to pray “lead us not into the wilderness.”

So let’s pray for a clear sense of God’s purpose. Let’s avoid sacrificing what is right on the altar of convenience. Remember that love and domination are incompatible, and that God alone confers the power of stewardship to us. Be wary of the spectacular, and realize that the Christian witness, while extraordinary, more often finds expression through ordinary moments of life. Resist temptation. Stay faithful. Fulfill God’s purposes. We will find ourselves in the wilderness from time to time, and our choices there make all the difference. Amen.