

“Resist with Purpose”
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Luke 4:1-13

In the Lord’s Prayer, we ask God “lead us not into temptation.” It is a strange request, because it implies that God might be willing to do just that. It doesn’t make sense. If God wants us to be faithful, then why would He lead us into temptation? Sometimes God tests us, to help strengthen our faith, but it’s Satan’s job to tempt us to sin, and if that’s part of God’s job, too, we’ve got a serious theological problem. Yet we still pray that phrase, every time we gather here to worship and hopefully at least once a day at home. We pray 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 leads us to the wilderness for a whole host of reasons. Jesus was led there immediately after his baptism and just prior to the inauguration of his official public ministry, presumably for a period of reflection and preparation. And we too occasionally find ourselves in a spiritual wilderness of sorts. It may be like the desert: a barren wasteland, arid and devoid of life, as if God has abandoned us; or it might wild place, unsettled and unfamiliar, like a rain forest, where we’re overwhelmed. I know that

nobody here is the least bit busy, so use your imagination as best you can about how that'd be. We can become so disoriented that we can no longer tell up from down.

In this wilderness great good may happen. We can discover new meaning, about God and ourselves. 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." Ancient monks, like St. Anthony, did the same, escaping the hustle and bustle of Alexandria to dwell in the Sinai desert, where they could devote themselves to prayer without distraction.

But the wilderness 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 can frighten us into hasty decisions with terrible results. 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? It almost seems stubborn of him. His fast was over. 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, but the devil is crafty. He didn't need a demonstration. He already knew who Jesus was. That's why he was out there in the first place. Instead, he 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 not intended for his own self-gratification. That power was intended to help others, primarily by serving as a witness to his identity as Messiah. Had Jesus relented, this would have been his first miracle, one performed not to heal others or feed them, but a miracle expended for selfish purposes, 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 knew that his life was sustained by spiritual nourishment, consisting 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 purpose of the miraculous power he possessed. Jesus would not sacrifice what is right for what is convenient, and we need to do as he did.

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 priorities and betray our mission. We must resist like Jesus, 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.

Temptation usually starts out small and practical. Prove yourself. Satisfy your hunger. Sacrifice what is right on the altar of convenience. Betray your mission, and deny your purpose. Small and practical temptations can lead to rotten 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, yet Jesus refused.

Some days, that really frustrates me. 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 fundamentally incompatible realities. 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. Everything we think we own is just on loan from God. We often try to derive power from a variety of worldly sources, but most of those sources offer what they cannot deliver, just as the devil tempted Jesus with something not his to give.

In the third temptation, the devil tempts Jesus to do something spectacular, namely jump off the pinnacle of the Temple, in order to prove who he is. The devil even threw in a little scripture quotation from Psalm 91 to justify his request. At first glance, it 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? Maybe 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, to pull off amazing stunts, because that’s the world we live in: a world of adrenaline junkies seeking emotional highs. Life in the 21st Century is about being spectacular, which means “something for

others to look at.” We may be tempted to be spectacular, something for others to look at and be amazed by, 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, a reality embedded in our liturgy. It’s not the Michael Delk show. It’s all of working together in prayer to ask for God’s blessing.

Now our witness may cause amazement, 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 those people want to be a part of that. 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. Beware of the spectacular in Christian witness. The spectacular may happen, but it is so rare that we should beware, because when the spectacular appears, it is often 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, whether to resist temptation and remain faithful or allow ourselves to be seduced by it.

Prayerful discernment is essential, because temptation is tricky. We need to be clear about God’s true purpose for us as a community, and for each of us individually.

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 on 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, and stay faithful. For we will find ourselves in the wilderness from time to time, and our choices there make all the difference. Amen.