

You Asked for It: Does God Leave Us in Temptation?

A Sermon by Louise F. Westfall

Fairmount Presbyterian Church

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Text: Matthew 6:9-13, Luke 11:2-4

“Show me where God is, and I will give you a gold coin,” the student challenged his teacher. After pausing only long enough to draw a breath, his teacher responded, “And I will give you two gold coins, if you show me where God is not.” This little tale from the Jewish tradition witnesses to a foundational principle of covenant theology: that God is omnipresent, everywhere an unseen but powerful presence, hallowing the universe with Mystery and meaning. Judeo-Christian faith affirms that God is personally present to people in all times and circumstances. There is no human place—no ecstasy, no tragedy, no heartbreak, no delight---where God is not present; in every season and situation, God’s presence may be known as goodness, grace, and love.

The Bible is full of God’s promise to be with us, come what may. From the establishment of God’s covenantal relationship with Israel: *I will be your God and you will be my people*, to the vision of a new heaven and a new earth in which *death...and crying and pain will be no more, and God will wipe every tear from our eyes...God’s steadfast presence is assured*. The words of the prophets decrying injustice and calling the people to repent are equally resonant with testimony to the One who says, *“Do not fear, for I am with you.”* And after commissioning disciples to continue his redeeming ministry after its earthly part was over, Jesus promised, *“I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* Notice how the biblical witness does not invoke God’s presence as a good luck charm, something that will protect and insulate us from life’s troubles and sorrows. We will undoubtedly spend some time in the valley of the shadow of death. What we can count on is that we won’t be there alone; we will have the comfort and companionship of God.

This bedrock affirmation provided part of the provocation for today's requested sermon topic. If God is for us, why do we have to intercede for God's help? *Does God leave us in temptation?* The member specifically wondered about the petition we pray every Sunday in the Lord's Prayer. Do we need to plead with God not to abandon us in struggling times, when we are uncertain about the choices presented us, when the good seems all too ambiguous? This question may be even more acute if we recall the traditional wording of the Lord's Prayer: *lead us not into temptation*. That petition's always seemed as if God might draw us down the path of temptation and needs to be persuaded against it. In fact, former pastor Hank Andersen recommended the alternate we still use precisely because of this confusion. "[The phrase] Leave us not in temptation" he noted in a sermon, "puts the whole responsibility for sin where it belongs: upon the free unfettered will of us humans" and not upon God. [*from sermon archives 11.16.76*] Of course, biblical translation is an inexact science. Some have argued against the Fairmount version since most linguistic evidence favors the traditional wording, no matter the theological issues it may raise. But let's read the prayer again in its two biblical versions, which vary from each other slightly, and from the way we offer it significantly. Listen anew for God's word to the church in the readings from the gospel according to Matthew in the sixth chapter, and the gospel of Luke in the 11th chapter.

[MATTHEW 6:7-13 and LUKE 11:1-4]

The process for becoming a Presbyterian minister of Word and Sacrament is long and arduous, and after the required graduate education, the practicums and field work and written exams, a candidate is questioned by ministers and elders on the floor of a presbytery—the regional church body. Sometimes this is fairly straightforward, with a few standard questions, but occasionally things take on the tone of an inquisition. The story is told of one such examination, when a young woman endured more than two hours of questioning that seemed to have an edge to it. Finally, when it appeared things were winding down, one hotshot young pastor stood up and said,

“Young lady, I have one more question about your fitness to be a minister: Would you be willing to be damned for the glory of God?” To which she replied, “Sir, for the glory of God I’d be willing for this whole presbytery to be damned.”

Well. Some temptations may just be too hard to resist! And sometimes it is through temptation and testing that we learn new insights or develop resilience or discover an inner strength we didn’t know we had. Temptation itself is not necessarily a bad thing. It certainly is a common experience of human life. But whether we translate the Lord’s Prayer petition as “leave us not in temptation” or “lead us not into temptation”, the question of intent remains. Does God, in fact, tempt human beings to sin—or, when we are tempted, leave us to figure it out and resist it entirely on our own?

If the answer is yes, then the Bible contradicts itself on an essential matter. All the promises of God’s faithful presence and help in times of trouble would be cast into doubt. We find direct refutation of divine temptation in the letter of James: *Blessed is anyone who endures temptation....[but] no one, when tempted, should say, “I am being tempted by God; for God tempts no one...One is tempted by one’s own desire...[James 1:12-14]* Jesus’ own severe temptation in the wilderness is clearly attributed to Satan, not God. Our reading of Scripture leads us to believe that God is not the author of human temptation. Life presents us with moral choices and we pray for God’s help to make the right ones. Don’t leave us to our own devices, O God! Strengthen us to choose the good.

Maybe the problem is not so much on the “lead/leave” translation question, as it is on the meaning of “temptation.” If we mostly associate that with the inclination to engage in specific, “naughty” behaviors—what Martin Luther called “puppy sins”—we may be looking at it too narrowly. Some translators say that the Aramaic phrase used here refers more to “testing” and connotes a broader context of faith formation. This perspective suggests that God may indeed test us as a way of helping us clarify our identity and purpose. What are

you made of? How strong is your faith when confronted by complex choices, tragic situations, or morally ambiguous options? Not unlike Jesus, we will be tempted with power and influence and self-reliance. We will be tempted to put many other things ahead of our relationship with God. And often, life itself will simply expand and fill every possible crack through which God might enter and speak to us. Just as gold is refined by being subjected to high heat, so may our faith be strengthened through hardship and difficulty. How often have I heard someone say that they experienced the presence and peace of God most tangibly in times of trial. Understand, I'm not saying God is the author of those hardships and difficult situations. But they may become the path through which our priorities are clarified and our deepest commitments affirmed. The Lord's Prayer petition then becomes a plea that we not fail the test. We pray for God's mercy to save us from the courtroom in which we will undoubtedly be found guilty. We pray for God's mercy to deliver us from the disintegrating threat of evil. Note that this isn't a cry to get us out of the messes we create by our bad choices. It is instead an acknowledgement of the reality of evil and the depth to which we are vulnerable to it. It is a request to become aware of and to remove anything that separates us from God, and everything that blocks our awareness of God's presence and saving love. In the end, it will only be God's grace that will bring us through trials and lead us safely home.

So why fool around with the wording of the Lord's Prayer? In a world of shifting sand, why change one more thing, and this a tradition that has served us well for 30 years? Well, consider this: language matters. Words not only reflect reality, they actually create it. Our language about God, of course, always falls short: the finite and fallible cannot "create" the infinite and infallible, the Holy One who is ruler of heaven and earth. But what we put into words about our relationship with God is significant. What we ask of God says something about what God asks of us. This prayer, attributed to Jesus himself, is both a simple and profound description of our identity and the purpose of human life. We are children of a God so great that

the Divine Name itself is hallowed; we are children of a God so loving as to be called a parent who provides daily everything that is needed . We are called to glorify God and work to bring God's kingdom here "on earth as it is in heaven."

So we pray every time we gather to worship. Here at Fairmount we include it in the children's message so they will come to know it by heart. By heart! Imprinted upon them deeply enough to be a light to their path, a lamp to their feet...and to grown-up ones as well. To know beyond doubt that God is with us, loving and leading us through each stage of life with its attendant developmental tasks and challenges. To know we are not alone.

The version of the Lord's Prayer [8:30 we will pray today] [10 the children led us to pray earlier] was developed by an international, ecumenical group over 20 years ago to be shared throughout the Christian Church. Churches of every denomination and stripe, Protestant, Roman Catholic, or Orthodox, from every nation on earth—all pray this prayer. In a time when the church is fractured and diminished, when religious authorities in some quarters are declaring themselves "the true church" and their way the only one, to pray in a single voice for God's Kingdom to come on earth, could be a powerful unifier, and remind us that God's goals are greater than the agendas of any one church or tradition. I believe it is time for us to join together in a spirit of unity to pray this version of the Lord's Prayer, not "the Fairmount version" which holds us apart. I'll ask the Worship Council to recommend the ecumenical version to the Session for use in worship. At first it may seem awkward—we'll have to look at the printed text instead of rattling it off. But there will be value even in that - we'll notice the words, we'll think about the meaning, we'll pray the prayer as if for the first time—and may find ourselves surprised anew by its truth and the spiritual power it reveals as accessible to us.

My vacation this year took me to Alaska (oh no! is a three-part series in your future??!!). One afternoon we signed up for a

white-water rafting trip on the Nenana River which included some thrilling rapids and unforgettable wilderness sights. When we made our reservations we had to sign a waiver of liability which ran two pages of extremely small type, single-spaced. Among the clauses was one that went on at some length, saying how this experience posed certain risks, but that the risks were an inherent part of the fun. In other words, the risks involved were part of what made white-water rafting desirable. If we wanted to eliminate risk, then we should go grab a chaise lounge at the hotel swimming pool. As I read it, I was struck by its similarities with the Christian mission (see I never really get away from my job!). This calling of ours—to join with God in building the kingdom on earth, in giving and forgiving—is risky business, above and beyond all the risks that come from simply being alive. We are choosing to engage in an activity where we may encounter hidden dangers and rocky stretches. Our skill at paddling and navigating varies. But what a ride! What a life! Don't ever settle for a seat on the sidelines, when God calls you to an enterprise of breathtaking purpose and heady joy. And don't ever forget: God will be right there too.

At the end of the day—and at its beginning, may this be our prayer: *Our Father in heaven, save us from anything that blocks our awareness of your presence and power in our lives, rescue us from our fears, and strengthen our desire to do your will; for the sake of your righteous kingdom. Amen.*

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