
Lead Us Not into Temptation

A sermon by Canon Lauren Holder
Lent 1 - Year A

I have been remembering this week a woman who was active in the life of one of the churches I served in New York. She was a regular at the Thursday noon service, which happened to be the weekday service I officiated. I say “happened to be” because her attendance had nothing to do with my presence. She had been attending on Thursdays alongside her faithful friends long before I arrived.

This lovely group of sage women would meet on Thursday mornings for gentle yoga, Bible Study, noon Eucharist, and lunch together. I would join their lunches any time a birthday was celebrated. I envied their Thursday routine. And I was blessed by their consistency.

In any case, this one particular woman had a bone to pick with the Lord’s Prayer, specifically when we used the traditional translation we use in this service. She was opposed to the phrase: *Lead us not into temptation*. She argued that God would never lead us into temptation. She much preferred the contemporary translation: *Save us from the time of trial*. Yes, that’s what God does! God saves us! God does not lead us into temptation.

And yet... did you notice how today’s Gospel begins? “After Jesus was baptized, he was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” Jesus was led by the Spirit! Into the wilderness! To be tempted by the devil! The same Spirit of God that descended on Jesus like a dove at his baptism with the words, “This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased,” that same Spirit that calls Jesus beloved now leads Jesus into temptation. Why?

Why in the world would God possibly want any of us to be in the wilderness. To be deprived of food and comfort. To be exposed without protection. And then to be tempted—to wrestle with a wily devil who’s actually pretty good at quoting scripture.

This is not an “everything happens for a reason” kind of sermon. That’s not my theology. I don’t think the Spirit led Jesus to the wilderness to teach him a lesson.

Rather, this is a sermon about how God is not absent from the wilderness. When we find ourselves in the wilderness, it’s not because we’ve been sent away from God’s presence. No, God is there. Even there.

And when the devil tries to distance us from God by encouraging us to depend on our own strength, or question God’s provision, or worship something more convenient—even and especially in those moments, God is with us.

I wish I could say that when we are steadfast in relying on God alone, as Jesus does in today’s text, that angels swoop in and save the day and everything is peachy from there on out. But we know that’s not true. We know it because this wilderness story we hear is only the first of many hard things Jesus will endure in his ministry.

My guess is that when the angels came to Jesus’ side to wait on him, they didn’t say, “There, there. The worst is over. This was all part of God’s plan.” But they could have said, “That was hard. We saw it all. God loves you.”

You know what’s really hard for me? Saying, “I’m sorry.” I say it in the empathic sense all the time—that part is easy. It’s when I’m admitting I’ve done something wrong that I struggle.

I've noticed this even more lately because one of my children also really struggles to apologize. It's not that he's not sorry—you can tell by his face that he's actually beating himself up. It's just so hard to muster up the words, "I'm sorry," when how those words feel is something closer to: I screwed up, I'm a disappointment, I'm not good enough.

One of our adult Sunday School classes has been discussing over the past five weeks this search for being good enough. Whether it be at work, at home, at church, in school, even when we're supposed to be having fun!... there's this sense that we need to be exceeding expectations all the time just to be considered average or competent... and it's exhausting. Beating ourselves up when we fail to live up to constant optimization is also exhausting. So we wear ourselves out trying to achieve an impossible ideal, and then we wear ourselves out with regret and self-loathing when we come up short.

And yet look at what we can learn from Psalm 32: "Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven and whose sin is put away!" Of course, to be forgiven, we must first ask forgiveness, so the psalmist continues: "While I held my tongue, my bones withered away...". Aha! Happiness does not lie in being perfect! Not in trying to cover up our shortcomings so we can impress others! No—that's exhausting. That makes our bones wither away.

Happiness comes in remembering that we're not actually God. That we're not meant to be perfect. That admitting our mistakes and trusting in God to be God can be quite life-giving.

The psalmist says, "mercy embraces those who trust in the Lord." Hmm. Doesn't that sound lovely. To be embraced and enveloped in mercy? It does require trusting in God, and that can be hard. But surely it's easier than trying to be perfect.

The psalmist ends by describing the act of confessing sin and seeking forgiveness like this: "Be glad, you righteous, and rejoice in the Lord; shout for joy, all who are true of heart."

Confession and forgiveness never sounded so good! Forget the sackcloth and ashes—Lent sounds quite lovely right about now. Except, if you're like me, apologizing is still hard. I'm glad Psalm 32 is there to remind me it doesn't have to be.

Perhaps trying to lean on our own strength and get all the things right all the time is when we are most exposed, most alone, most famished.

Perhaps when we confess that we are not the Gods we sometimes try to be, or that we've worshipped work and parenting and even church more than we worship the God who creates, redeems and sustains us—perhaps when we turn to God and say, "I'm sorry God. Help me put my trust in you!"

Perhaps then we will feel mercy embrace us as angels come to our side and say, "That was hard. We saw it all. God loves you."

Because God is always there. Even in the wilderness.

Amen.