

*Temptation and Evil*

Each time we say the Lord's Prayer we pray these two petitions, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Our gospel reading today relates directly to those two petitions about temptation and evil as it tells us how the Evil One tempted Jesus. Perhaps because we hear the story of Jesus' Temptation every year on the first Sunday of Lent, and perhaps because we pray the Lord's Prayer so often, the words *temptation* and *evil* may not make much of an impression on us anymore.

We have pretty much banished the concepts of temptation and evil from the modern world. Still, temptation and evil are most definitely still among us. Temptation and evil are two things we need to re-consider as journey through Lent and, more importantly, two things we need to struggle against on our daily Christian walk through life.

We will examine evil first. A better translation of "deliver us from evil" would be "deliver us from the Evil One." The idea that there is an Evil One, the Devil as Luke calls him, or Satan as he is known, may not sit well with all modern people. The trend among many Christians today is to see evil only as an abstraction and the Devil as merely the literary personification of evil. That is not the position of the gospel writers and other biblical authors. That is certainly not how Jesus viewed to the Devil.

Some might argue that Jesus only humored his contemporaries by seeming to accept the existence of Satan, or, that Jesus was limited by his human nature in such a way as to uncritically buy into the theology of his times. Some might say that the exorcisms Jesus performed were really only placebo effect healings of those mentally or physically ill. That's not what scripture says. Those are not convincing arguments for us.

The demons, the Devil's minions, recognized Jesus as the Son of God when he cast them out, even when others had not yet positively identified Jesus' divine nature. And there are fascinating accounts by reputable authors of exorcisms in the current day. Moreover, Jesus seemed to know the Devil personally. Jesus called him "a murderer from the beginning" and "the father of lies." Jesus also called him "the deceiver of this world."

When we think about it, it would be a great strategy for the Devil to deceive the Christian world into thinking that he didn't exist. It would be like terrorists convincing us that terrorists didn't exist. If we believed terrorists didn't exist, we would have no security against them and the terrorists could do to us whatever they pleased. In a similar way, when Satan convinces us that he doesn't exist, then he can have his way with us unimpeded. Can you see that happening today, the Devil running amok among people who think that there is no Devil? That explains a lot.

Consider this as well: If Jesus is our Savior, who did Jesus save us from? If Jesus' cross is a victory, over whom is it a triumph? If the Evil One is merely a poetic device, if Evil is not a real personal force opposed to God's will, than Jesus' Passion and Death are nothing more than divine child abuse. But that is not the case. Although the Devil still rails against us, Jesus' death and resurrection has signaled Satan's ultimate defeat.

Although the Evil One is still the "prince of this world," as Jesus called him, we who are in Christ need not fear the Devil because Jesus has conquered him with his self-sacrificing love. The time in which we live, the Christian era, is the time for Jesus' victory to spread across the earth, setting people free from "sin and death and the Devil," to use Luther's phrase, and bringing them to the joy and peace that comes from knowing Christ. Even though his time is limited, the Devil still plays his games and wages his war against God's saints before Jesus comes again and when God will be all-in-all. One way the Devil harasses today us is through *Temptation*, which we will examine now.

We notice in the gospel reading that it is the Holy Spirit that leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. Notice that it is not the Spirit that tempts him -- God cannot be tempted by evil and God Himself tempts no one – but it is the Spirit that puts Jesus in the position to be tested by Satan. This is not so much a test to see whether or not Jesus can withstand temptation and therefore stake his claim to be Messiah. This test is more to show that Jesus is who God said he was at his baptism and to show that as God’s Son he cannot fail.

We talk to people all the time who feel God is testing them. I try to remind that their tests, like Jesus’ test, are not God’s attempts to make or break them as Christians. Rather they are opportunities to prove their Christian character in adversity and shine as the burning lights God intends them to be. Such testing is necessary for our growth as Christians. We will not grow spiritually unless we are challenged. We grow in Christ by standing up to the temptations and taunts of the Evil One.

An equally valid translation of that petition of Lord’s Prayer that says “Lead us not into temptation” is “Do not let us yield to temptation.” When we pray that way, we are in harmony with God’s will for us. God wants to free us from all evil, and free us from the Evil One. When we pray “lead us not into temptation” we are imploring the Holy Spirit to help us in our discernment and give us strength. We are in a constant battle between the flesh and the Spirit, a cosmic battle between good and evil, and we cannot survive such a battle on our own. Oscar Wilde spoke for all humanity when he said, “I can withstand anything but temptation.” On our own we are lost. We can only withstand temptation with God’s help, by his grace.

Notice also how the Devil’s temptations are custom tailored to Jesus’ personality. The Devil knew Jesus was a good person, a loving person, a person who wanted to extend the

Kingdom of God. So Jesus was tempted with good things: bread for the hungry world, signs and wondrous displays of God's power, nations bowing to King Jesus. But Jesus could see through those tricks. The only way for him to truly honor God and win our salvation was through the cross and the gate of death, and anything else, however good it may have seemed, was simply not good enough.

Sadly, the Devil can often get us to yield to his temptations for much less than he offered Jesus. Every person has his or her weakness. For some it's alcohol, for others it's drugs, for others it may be sex or money or power or revenge or something else. There is an old painting of the Devil, with the classic horns and pitchfork, sitting at a table, trading big bags of money with stately looking business men for signing their names in his book. If only recognizing Satan was that easy. If only his deals were that obvious. But they're not.

Instead, Satan comes to us with beauty and style. He offers us joy and comfort, and whatever else you desire or deserve. There is no need to sign a promissory note in blood. A little white lie here, an unkind word there, just a little bit of cheating will do... at first. Later, our vices become habits and what once seemed to be unfathomably evil to us becomes everyday and commonplace. Quickly, we can lose our faith and lose our way, and we replace our Lord and Savior with the satanic "lord of this world" without even realizing we made the switch.

How can we resist such insidious temptations? First of all, often the best way to avoid temptation is to simply avoid places where you are likely to be tempted. Stay away from the people and places that would lead you astray. When you see temptation coming -- Run! There's no shame in that.

Secondly, spiritual discipline, such as the disciplines of Lent, can help us to resist temptation. Jesus turned away the Tempter with scripture. Do we know scripture well

enough that we can quote it in the face of temptation? Can we easily go to scripture to find comfort and hope in our trials? If not, we have some homework to do. And then there's prayer and fasting. Jesus said certain demons could only be exorcised through prayer and fasting. How often do we talk with God? Have we ever denied ourselves any comfort? Frequently we no idea what Jesus did and endured in the wilderness for our sake.

Lent gives us an opportunity to tune up our relationship with our Heavenly Father and grow in grace through prayer, scripture reading, and self-denial. Let's take that opportunity. Ask Jesus to lead us on, to lead us to the end of our Lenten journey, which culminates with his cross and the empty tomb. Amen.