“Lead Us Not Into Temptation”

Matthew 6.9-13
May 5, 2013
Rev. D2

(Please open your bulletin & pull out your Sermon notes entitled Lead us not into temptation; I’d like to encourage you to write down things you’d like to remember & reflect upon during the week)

Once again we are continuing our sermon series on the Lord’s Prayer. Over the last 5 weeks, we’ve focused on the various sections of this prayer seeking to understand what Jesus was trying to say to us. This prayer is a pattern prayer and it’s not only meant to be a pattern for our prayer life, but also a pattern for our spiritual life as well. Our text for today is:

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

This is a very important part of the prayer because it’s important to our spiritual lives. We wrestle with temptation. We need to be delivered from evil. It’s a serious issue and Jesus has placed it here for a reason.

Now, a couple of weeks ago when I was preaching about our daily bread, I illustrated how the whole Biblical narrative could be told with references to bread. On a more foundational level, I believe the entire Biblical story can be summarized as the story of human temptation and how we succumb to temptation as well as God’s efforts to save us from the tragic consequences when we do succumb to temptation.

The Biblical story begins in the Garden of Eden with:

Adam and Eve and a tree.
God says – you can eat anything in this garden;
You can enjoy everything that’s here;
I give all of this to you as a gift;
There’s just one rule;
Just one thing that I ask of you;
Don’t eat from the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil.

This voice is echoing in their heads. They hear the voice of God telling them this, but they quickly begin to hear another voice; The voice of the serpent. The serpent begins to whisper in their ear:

Are you sure that’s what God meant? Did God really say you couldn’t eat of the tree? Surely, you won’t die the day you eat of that fruit? Look at how beautiful it is. Can’t you just imagine how tasty it must be if only you’d take just a bite? What’s the harm in one simple bite?
No doubt they must have spent days, weeks, maybe even months mulling over the beauty of the fruit before finally one of them plucked the fruit from the tree and took a bite. And in that day, paradise was lost. The power of that story is that it’s our story! It’s the story of what our lives are like from the time we’re old enough to understand that we have 2 voices that echo in our ears:

One is the voice of God who calls us and beckons us to follow him and live in his love and to pursue his will and love other people and live lives of justice. Then, there’s that other voice, the voice of the serpent which says:

That’s not right;
There’s not a God who’s going to care about these things;
It doesn’t really matter what you do;
Look how beautiful the fruit looks and how tasty;
Just try it or you’re going to be missing out in life.

You know that we all have these 2 voices speaking to us each day and the question is: Which voice will you listen to? And what will you do with the other voice? Before we go any further into the meaning of this phrase: Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil; Let’s recognized that this is a complex phrase. In fact, it’s somewhat perplexing. Why would we pray for God not to lead us into temptation if God doesn’t lead us into temptation? In fact, James writes his Epistle partly in response to a misunderstanding over the Lord’s Prayer. Here’s what James says:

No one, when tempted, should say,
I am being tempted by God;
For God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. (James 1.13)

So, if God doesn’t tempt us, then why do we have to pray: Lead us not into temptation? Biblical scholars point out that the word “temptation” in the Greek can also mean “trial or testing”. At first glance, we might think that fixes everything, but in the text, Jesus says: …Do not bring us to the time of trial. So, why do we have to tell God not to bring us to a time of trial or testing? I think the answer points us towards how this prayer helps us deal with temptation in regards to the 2 voices that we hear. Here’s a thought: What happens if you move the comma? We usually pray the Lord’s Prayer like this:
Lead us not into temptation, (Comma) But deliver us from evil.
What happens if we move the comma over and say:
Lead us, (Comma) not into temptation?

What if Jesus is saying that we should let God lead us every day and all the time?
That’s the voice that Jesus is saying we need to listen too.
Lord, let me listen to this voice.
Lord, let me listen to your voice and lead me so that I don’t go into temptation because I
have a natural inclination to go into temptation.
So, it’s not God leading us into temptation, but we are pretty good at leading ourselves
into temptation or with the help of the tempter.
So, this is a prayer about who’s going to lead us in our life.
Let’s look at the beginning of the text: Lead us….

In the Bible, God is constantly trying to lead the people.
God does this by a column of smoke and a pillar of fire when the Israelites are in the
wilderness.

God gives us the 10 commandments and says:
If you will listen to these words and obey my commands, I’ll bless you and you will find
life in this.
The prophets come along later to warn the people not to listen to the other voice.
Then the Psalmist tells us that to be a follower of God is to listen to the voice of God and
allow God to lead us.
The Psalmist says:

You lead me beside the still waters, you restore my soul;
You lead me in the paths of righteousness for your name sake.

When we come to the New Testament, we find that Jesus defines what it means to be His
disciple.
He says:
If anyone would be my disciple they must deny themselves, take up their cross and
follow me.
He says:
I am the Good Shepherd and my sheep know my voice and they follow me.
When Jesus beckoned the disciples to be His disciples, He called them by name and said,
Come, follow me.

So, to be a Christian is to be a Follower of Christ!

To be a Follower of Christ is to seek to be led by Him.
To call Him Lord is to say:
I want to go in the direction that you want me to go.
So, a really great prayer patterned after the Lord’s Prayer would be to say every morning
when you wake up:
Lord, lead me where we want me to go;  
Help me to hear your will;  
Help me to know your will;  
Help me to pursue your will.

But, how do we know where God wants to lead us?  
God doesn’t give us the handwriting on the wall, but does speak to us by the nudging of the Holy Spirit.  
It’s that still small voice.  
God doesn’t shout, but just nudges us.  
I’m guessing that many of you have experienced this already and if you haven’t, I’m sure you will at some point in your life.  
What I mean is those times you felt nudged to call somebody and you called them.  
And at that very moment, that person really needed to hear from you.  
Where did that come from?  
Was it ESP (Extra Sensory Perception) or was it the nudging of the Holy Spirit leading you?  
Or those of you who went on our Mission trip to Haiti.  
You saw something about it in the church newsletter and you weren’t sure if you wanted to take a week’s vacation to do it, but there was something inside of you that wouldn’t let it go.  
You kept hearing – you’ve got to do this.  
You’ve got to sign up.  
And then right before you left on your trip, you may have been a little afraid saying:  
Oh my gosh, what have I gotten myself into?  
What if I get sick?  
What happens if the plane crashes?  
You know, all those things that go through your mind when you’re thinking about taking an international mission trip.  
But, you did it anyway.  
You listened to the nudging!  
And when you came back, you said:  
How grateful I am that I listened to that voice!  
So, God nudges us with His Spirit.  
And the longer we’re Christians, the more carefully we learn to listen and we learn to differentiate His voice from ours.

There’s also the scriptures.  
We encourage you to take your Bible wherever you go.  
Take time to read it everyday.  
Read one chapter a day and say:  
God, guide me by these words – then allow God to speak to you.  
Perhaps, out of that one chapter, one verse will seem to jump off the page and speak to you.
So, you meditate on it and begin to pray about it and before you know it, God is leading you by virtue of the scriptures. It happens in our Quest groups.

When I am in my small group with my fellow Christians and we’re talking about the topic of our study sometimes in the midst of that, I begin to feel God speaking to me and there’s guidance that happens there.

It happens in the quietness of meditation when I pray and it certainly happens for me in worship.

But, it also happens to me when I’m listening to other people speak or preach which is why when I am attending another churches worship service, I always have a pen and paper in my pocket so I can write down notes and ideas as they come to me. I truly believe these are ways that God speaks to me. God speaks to lead us. God speaks still today. The only question is: Are we listening? And which voice are we listening too?

In this part of the prayer, we are simply asking God to lead us away from temptation because we have a nose for temptation. I don’t know about you, but I tend to find it or to seek it out:

It’s hard to live in a town like ours and not inadvertently over-hear conversations of gossip. I know that I drive too fast and I eat too much which is a form of gluttony. There’re lots of ways we succumb to temptation. Which is why we need help from God to deliver us from Temptation. When we pray for God to help steer us in the right direction, it opens our heart even more to be guided and lead by God.

Story of childhood dog – named Queenie! Chocolate & closing the Pantry door.

So, when we pray:
Lord, lead me not into temptation. What we’re saying to God is:
Help me close the pantry door. So, that I don’t find myself in a place that I can’t resist. God may close the pantry door for us, but God doesn’t lock it. So, in the end, you still have to decide.

Then the prayer goes on to say:
Lead me Lord.
Steer me clear of temptation.
Then we’re to pray for Jesus to deliver us from evil.
Evil… that’s a strong word.

Evil or the evil one which is more likely what Jesus meant in this prayer because in the Greek, the Greek word “ponerou” is precipitated by the article or the word “the” prior to the word evil.
The evil one is the one who would destroy us.
Some people believe in a literal Satan.
Some people look at the scriptures about Satan and say this is a way of talking about and personifying that other voice that’s so strong and so real and so personal.
When we talk about Satan, we’re not looking at a co-equal with God who is warring against God, because Satan has limited power compared to God.
So, Satan can’t make you do anything.
But, what Satan does delight in doing is tempting us and testing us and trying to convince us that the truth is a lie and the lies are the truth.
Satan delights in twisting things around and coaxing us to do things that hurt us, hurt other people and separates us from God.
And cause us to do things that diminish our impact and our witness in the world and ultimately to shorten our own lives by pursuing his path.
We are to pray to be delivered from this evil one.
When I think about the evil one and how he works,
He continues to whisper in people’s ears asking them to do what they don’t want to do.
And when we listen to his voice, we find it very seductive.

The senior pastor of one of the churches I served years ago was a great preacher and counselor.
People in general looked up to him.
There were at least 7 women who began seeking his advice and guidance.
This made him feel extremely special.
It made him feel like how a boy in 7th grade feels when a girl has a crush on him.
And as this pastor would enter into these conversations, he found himself drawn to them.
What started out as conversation, turned into flirtation which eventually turned into fantasy.
And fantasy turned into inappropriate intimate friendships which eventually turned into sexual encounters.
He couldn’t allow himself to consider that his inappropriate behavior would eventually be discovered.
Nor could he allow himself to contemplate the consequences of his actions.
Of course, he’s no longer a United Methodist Pastor, his ordination credentials were taken away from him.

The church was sued, the Bishop was sued and the Annual Conference was sued and he and some of the people who were on staff before I was appointed to the church were sued by the women and their families.
And there are many people who continue to live with the damage that was done by his actions. James says this in the conclusion of that text that I read from earlier:

…One is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it; Then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, And that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. (James 1.14-15)

There are a lot of sins that are small sins. Even our Catholic friends differentiate between venial sins and mortal sins. Venial sins are your basic garden variety sins. It’s no big deal stopping by to have a few donuts at the Doughbox. It’s no sin to go to the Doughbox for a donut, until you over indulge to the point of gluttony. There are some things that are not a big sin. The problem is that when we look at the small sins and we say that they’re no big deal, we find that we begin to partake of a little bit bigger sins, and a little bigger sins and a little bigger sins. Sin has a way of luring us and leading us and in the end, Paul said it this way: The wages of sin are death. The destruction of our character, or of our dreams, or the people around us or our relationship with God. Jesus said it was so serious that if your eye causes you to sin to …what? Pluck it out. If your hand causes you to sin…what? Cut it off. Deliver us from the evil one – The Tempter; The Adversary; The Enemy of our souls; The dragon; The old liar; Satan.

The interesting thing about this word – rusai, which is the word for deliver, is that it’s where our English word “rush” comes from.

So, think about the Defense in football. Their primary agenda is to rush the Quarterback or ball carrier and tackle him. So, what Jesus is literally saying when He says for us to pray: Deliver us from the evil one is: Sack him, Lord!

Or consider the problem we’ve been having over the last decade with the Emerald Ash Beetle that has been killing off all of our beautiful Ash Trees. It’s a non-native species that lays its eggs in the crevices of the tree bark and the larvae burrow into the tree and eat the inside of the tree before they emerge as fully grown
beetles who eventually emerge back to the surface to mate and to start the whole process all over again.
It’s difficult to see symptoms in the first 1–2 years of infestation.
Typically in the third year after infestation, the tree will exhibit significant dieback.
By the end of the 4th year after the original infestation begins, the tree will be dead.
And this is like what sin does in our lives.
It eats us from the inside out and it destroys us.
We look fine and healthy spiritually to everyone else until one day we fall.
Which is why Jesus told us to pray this prayer.
This is why Jesus is challenging us to listen to the voice of God and to pray:

God, lead me, lead me where you want me to go, in the paths of righteousness for your name sake.
Deliver me from the one who would destroy my soul.
Close the pantry and pull out the beetles!
And help me Lord to follow you.
This is a prayer that if you pray it daily, you will find that it will help you to combat the evil one.

I want to conclude with these invitations.
Some of you have been struggling with sin.
The kind of sin that can destroy.
And nobody knows it.
You’ve managed to hide it from everyone.
You know that there’re these beetles that are chewing away at your soul.
And you need to talk to somebody about it because you can’t figure out how to get rid of it.
Let me invite you to contact me here at the office.
We have people come in all the time to discuss theological questions, Biblical questions so nobody’s going to know why you’re coming in.
And we hold things in complete confidence.
I’ll pray with you and we begin to sort things out.
And for all of us who have stepped across those lines, and we all have at some point, I want to invite you today to ask God for forgiveness.
God is the God of the second chance.
The Bible is not only the story of human beings succumbing to temptation, it’s also the story of God picking us up afterwards and making us whole.
So, in a moment I am going to invite you to simply ask God for forgiveness and for mercy and for those things in your life where you have allowed sin to come in, perhaps just little sins.

And finally, I’m going to invite you to pray to the Lord: Lord, lead me, lead me, close the pantry door and lead me in your path of righteousness.
Take this time now to talk to God about those things in your life that are eating away at you.
Ask God to help you, to forgive you, to heal you, to close the pantry door and make you whole.
Let us pray as we have need….

O God, how grateful we are that you sent Jesus to save sinners, just like us. Save us. Deliver us from the evil one;
Deliver us from those things that eat us from the inside out and destroy us, that destroy our credibility, our witness, that destroy our relationships, our love for you and our love for others.
Help us to listen for your voice daily. Helps us to bask in the knowledge that as far as the East is from the West, you remove our sins from us. Help us O Lord, improve our hearing that we may hear you, that we may be led by you, that you might lead us in your path of righteousness for your name sake.
Help us O Lord, strengthen us, we pray. Close the pantry door, in Jesus name we pray,
Amen!