

March 18 – Save Us From the Time of Trial

Romans 7:14- 8:2

As we continue our look at the “Lord’s Prayer,” or for me a better title is the “Disciple’s Prayer,” we come to the phrase, “Lead us not into temptation” or “do not bring us to the time of trial.” No one is quite sure what Jesus meant with this phrase. This has led it to being interpreted many ways but none of the explanations are easy to understand or fit into our picture of a loving God. No one thinks God would actually lead us to be tempted so why should we pray asking God not to do this! Also, we know life has its share of trials and though we don’t like them we also see how, in many cases, we learn and grow in the midst of those trials, so do any of us want to be saved from all times of trial? Probably not. My best understanding of the intent in this prayer is: “Help us to watch where we are going so we don’t wander onto paths that will lead to sin,”

One of the things this part of the prayer remind us of is that temptations and the evils that give rise to it are real. As we speak these words we are saying in effect, “I am being tempted today God and I need help!” We don’t like that idea. We want to believe we are better than that. Jesus encourages us to bring this troubling truth into our praying. Admitting we are tempted makes it more likely we will resist the temptation. Ignoring it or pretending it has no power over us is what gets us into trouble. None of us plan to sin, but if we linger near the people and or activities that tempt us, it will lead us to places we do not want to go. So, we need to pray daily to keep on the right track.

I knew a person who was working hard at staying sober. They kept relapsing. The problem was that all of their friendships before starting this journey had centered around drinking. They would go to a bar after work, go over to someone’s house to watch a game and drink and so on. He thought he was strong enough to resist the temptation to drink so he could continue those type of relationships and just say no. He came to find out he had to develop new friendships, or have his current friends do things in a new way that didn’t include alcohol. Once he wasn’t continually tempted sobriety became a much more achievable goal. We can all think about paths we need to stay away from if we are going to resist certain temptations. Naming the temptation and asking God to keep us from going down that path is a way we grow in faith.

Each of us will have different sources of temptation. Our own desires lure us. What may be a temptation to me is not even an issue for you. We laugh at our home about chocolate and caramel. Jenny finds it very hard to resist chocolate. I can take it or leave it, but caramel, something she doesn't care that much about, I have to make sure it is not around if I am trying to watch my waistline. This prayer says that we can and should ask God to help us pay attention to our choices and to guard our way. It helps us to keep alert. We also need to realize that this is not saying, "Name the sin of another and make me the guardian of their path." We like to name other's sins and tell them how to avoid what we consider to be evil. This is talking about our problems of staying on the right path.

The second part of this petition at first seems much more straight forward. We pray, "Deliver us from Evil." Of course we want to be delivered from evil. When we think of the word "Evil" we often think in terms of the devil or whatever we name the negative forces in the world. There is so much evil and horror in the world. Sometimes, because of the horrific choices of others, we, or those we love, experience catastrophic pain or loss. But when we are asking to be delivered from evil, in the context of keeping us from straying into temptation, we are not talking about the evil outside of us and its impact on us, we are talking about the sin inside of us. Jesus realized that we need to be saved from ourselves, our desires, our wandering off the path. We need to be saved from the evil sin causes in our lives and in our faith community.

Again, both parts of these petitions are using the words "us" and "our." It is more than just individual temptations but the corporate temptations and evils we talk about. When individuals get more concerned about power and self than faithfulness they let power lead them into temptation and evil. When the church goes down those same paths, history shows us what evil we have committed in the name of God. When we refuse to forgive, as we know we are called to do in the earlier petition, we have seen the harm it does to relationships. We need to be saved from evil.

When we oppose evil with even small acts of courage, it pushes back, resisting the will of God. No matter where you might be in the debate about gun safety, I think we can all see this push back in some of the conversations recently around gun violence.

We have all been touched by the youth from Parkland Florida who have spoken eloquently about what they have gone through and what they believe is the solution. You don't even have to agree to be moved. And I hope we have all been appalled at some of the pushback that has occurred. These hurting youth have been vilified by some who disagree with them.

But when we join our will and our prayers with the will of God we can resist evil even when it pushes back. This petition is a request to not let us stray from the high calling that God has created for us. Our spirits may be willing but our flesh is weak. Jesus wants his disciples to share the good news through our words, teachings, and actions. This is the work that must be done in order for God's kingdom to come. The temptations to be pulled away from this calling are abundant.

Our Christian history is filled with people who strove to resist evil. During our lifetime we can think of Mother Theresa who felt it was wrong for people to die on the streets of Calcutta uncared for and unloved and set about creating a center to care for these people. In the beginning she was often put down but we know the rest. Or Martin Luther King Jr. who led the movement for equal rights and paid for it with his life. Yet, often in little ways I have been moved to see people resist the easy path because they knew that it was not what God wanted.

Perhaps you can identify with this story. The United Methodist Church in Moscow, Idaho is right across from the high school. We had our fair share of problems with the youth hiding behind our building to smoke, leaving trash and damaging property. There had become an us against them mentality with most of the trustees and a fair number of congregants thinking the best thing we could do is to never allow kids on our property for any reason during school hours. One day, one of the teachers, who was also a member, dropped in and said, "The high school has no place to do advanced placement testing. Would the church consider making the fellowship hall available?" I knew the feelings and told her, "You would have to get the Trustees to approve and I am not sure they would." She mentioned it to the chair and he immediately said, "No." She smiled and said, "You haven't heard the end of this." She started talking to the parents of all the students needing this test who were part of the

church. Soon, the Trustees were flooded with comments. The chair was not happy. He kept saying no, but others in the Trustees said, "We need to talk about it." The night of the meeting he came with a log of the calls we had made to the police and pictures of the trash. They still voted against him and said they would allow it at least once. He threatened to resign but was convinced to take a deep breath and let it go. After all, it was during school, teachers would be there. Then, one of the parents said, "Let's not just allow it but see it as an opportunity to build relationships. They purchased bottled water and snacks and had them available for the youth. The kids were so appreciative they wrote us a thank you note! They mentioned how nice we were to them and soon we were having less problems with kids smoking because their friends threatened to turn them in. The church began to be used many times a year for school events and a partnership grew. I won't say it was evil to say no but it was not of God. By not being defeated, not giving in when the push back happened, but looking at the best for the most, change happened.

We are to live a holy life, a life of justice, love, and forgiveness. We understand that evil is anything that goes against what God desires, so in praying this petition we know that God will likely use us to work for the eradication of evil in our lives, and in our relationships, and in the world.

So this week may your prayer focus be: "Lord keep me from safe from \_\_\_\_\_ and I offer myself anew for your works of love and justice."