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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Maundy Thursday, April 18th, 2019

Sermon: Lead Us Not into Temptation (Sixth Petition)

Text: Matthew 6:13a

Focus Statement: God tempts no one.

Function Statement: That they would take courage by Jesus overcoming temptation for us.

Doctrinal Locus: “God tempts no one. We pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice...” (SC, 6th Petition).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. “And lead us not into temptation” (Matt. 6:13a, ESV).¹ In the Small Catechism, Martin Luther writes:

“*What does this mean?* God tempts no one. We pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. Although we are attacked by these things, we pray that we may finally overcome them and win the victory” (SC, Sixth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer).

Mel Gibson imagines a tense scene at the beginning of his masterpiece, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). In the twilight Garden of Gethsemane, beneath a full moon, Jesus prays fervently on his knees, sweating drops of blood. As Jesus begs his heavenly Father to let the cup of suffering pass before him, Satan watches and whispers from the shadows. Disguised as an androgynous figure, hooded and cloaked, the devil asks, “Do you really believe that one man can bear the full burden of sin?”

Jesus continues to pray, and Satan tries to dissuade Jesus from his mission before he even gets started. Completely exhausted, Jesus finally faints to the ground. Slowly, a serpent slithers out from the folds of Satan’s garment and winds its way towards Jesus, recalling the first

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

temptation in the Garden of Eden. But just before the serpent strikes, Jesus looks the devil square in the eye and stomps on the snake, crushing its head.

The serpent reminds us of the tempter's efforts ever since Adam and Eve first ate the forbidden fruit. We also remember that immediately after his Baptism, Jesus was tempted for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness. St. Luke tells us that "when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from [Jesus] until an opportune time" (Luke 4:13). Now, on the night of Jesus' betrayal with the cross looming before him, Satan seizes the moment and tries to tempt Jesus once more.

"Lead us not into temptation," Jesus taught his disciples—teaches *us*. He said the same thing in the Garden: "Why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation" (Luke 22:46). Watch and pray so that you don't *fall* prey to the devil, "who prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8). If you don't take care, that someone might be *you*!

The Bible says that God tempts no one, nor can he *be* tempted (Jas. 1:13). So it seems strange for us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation." If God tempts no one, why would he *lead* us into temptation, or the time of trial and testing?² According to wild reports last December, Pope Francis wants to change the Lord's Prayer to say something along the lines of "Abandon us not when in temptation." But that's a terrible translation. Thankfully, it is the *Lord's* Prayer and *not* the pope's prayer. We mustn't trifle with the Word of God.

Even more outrageous is the idea that Jesus really could be tempted. Remember: God cannot be tempted (Jas. 1:13). Therefore, since Jesus is the divine Son of God, does that mean his temptation was only a show, a phony fiction? No, not at all. Jesus was fully divine *and* fully

² The Greek noun *peirasmos* can mean any of these three.

human, 100% God and 100% man. When Jesus endured temptation in the wilderness, he was tempted *according to his human nature*. This was essential because if Jesus did not face temptation, he really couldn't be our substitute on the cross because he wouldn't be *like* us. Yet, as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews assures us: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). Jesus has walked in our shoes. He's "been there"—he just hasn't "done that."

Jesus' trial and time of testing in the wilderness was very real. It wasn't easy. Indeed, "because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (Heb. 2:18). Jesus relates to our experience of resisting temptation. In a very real way, he is the only one who *truly* knows what it is like to resist to the point of breaking. Because all of us eventually cave in and give in to one temptation or another. The truly strong person is the one who faces temptation and yet never gives in. That is what Jesus did for you.

But Jesus' 40 days and 40 nights in the desert were not the end of his trials. As St. Luke tells us: "And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time" (Luke 4:13). The devil wasn't done yet. He was just done for now. But he waited for another chance to ensnare and entrap Jesus before the end.

Did that time come in the Garden, as Mel Gibson suggests in his film? Perhaps. Jesus did repeatedly beg God to take away the cross and make another way: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). Jesus didn't *want* to die, but he obeyed God's will because he *had* to die in order to save us from our sins. Whether the desire to avert death was from the devil or just a plain, human desire, I do not

know. What I *do* know is that Jesus willingly and gladly did his Father's will. "Not my will, but yours, be done."

So I am not certain that midnight in the Garden was the devil's "opportune time." Perhaps it was the time that Jesus' disciple, Simon Peter, rebuked him for talking about betrayal, death, and crucifixion, telling Jesus, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you" (Matt. 16:22). Peter tried to get Jesus to take a different path, and Jesus undid him: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man" (Matt. 16:23). The devil spoke to Jesus through one of his closest friends. Was that the opportune time? I still don't know.

Actually, I surmise that the devil's moment ultimately came when Jesus was hanging on the cross. For in words that are eerily similar to the temptations in the wilderness, the crowds jeered and taunted Jesus, saying, "*If you are* the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Matt. 27:40). If you *are* the son of God, turn these stones into bread. If you *are* the Son of God, jump off the roof of the Temple and see if the angels save your life. The last temptation of the Christ was to come down off the cross and make a spectacle by saving himself. Maybe if he would come down, his enemies and opponents would *finally* believe in him. Maybe if he would come down, he could live a normal, happy life to a ripe, old age. Perhaps he might even take a wife and raise a family.

But if Jesus did come down, then all hope would have been lost for us. Only by the death of the perfect Son of God *in our place*, dying *our death*, could we be saved. So Jesus stayed. He remained, and he died *for you*. As it says in Hebrews, "for the joy set before him [Jesus] endured the cross, scorning its shame..." (Heb. 12:2, NIV). The joy set before him was not even his

resurrection victory, but our own salvation. For nothing gives God more joy than sinners being saved (cp. Luke 15:7, 10).

The Good News is that, because Jesus overcame every temptation, death, and the grave, we are no longer doomed. We don't fear temptation because we know that Christ won victory for us. We don't get down on ourselves or beat ourselves up when we fall into temptation because Christ forgives our sins. Nor do we feel alone when we face the tempter, for we know that Christ is with us and in us (cf. Matt. 28:20). Indeed, as St. Paul writes, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Cor. 10:13). Somebody somewhere has faced the same temptations you face. Christ faced and endured them all, and yet remained without sin (cf. Heb. 4:15). He sympathizes with our weakness. He raises us up when we fall. And he is our ultimate "out," our only escape. Without Christ we would be damned and doomed to die. But with Christ, we are rescued from temptation—and ourselves.

In the Garden, Jesus told his disciples, "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt. 26:41). Watch and pray. So we pray: "Lead us not into temptation." We ask God to do for us the exact opposite of what Christ was forced to do *for us*. Jesus faced every temptation—and won. Now, because he endured and overcame, we have ultimate victory in Jesus' name. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.