

Lent 1, Year C
Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa
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Save us in the time of trial

“Lead us not into temptation.”

“Do not bring us to the test.”

“Save us in the time of trial.”

All three are contemporary translations—interpretations, really—of one of four phrases in the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray, where we ask God for the things we need most.

“And deliver us from evil”—save us from the Tempter, the Evil One, the Adversary. The final phrase of entreaty

It’s Lent. And to begin Lent, we pick up Jesus’s story from the point of his baptism, and the announcement from heaven that Jesus is God’s beloved Son, the one who is God with us and God for us in human form, the one who brings our salvation to us, even in the midst of the woes, the tragedies, the sufferings, and even the joys of the world.

Jesus is baptized; his identity is proclaimed. And he goes out into the wilderness, where he fasts for 40 days and nights. The resonance with Israel’s wandering in the desert is strong, and deliberate—Jesus points to the renewed Israel. And at the culmination of this desert experience, the devil comes to Jesus to tempt him.

Here Jesus is at his most vulnerable. He's hungry. He's tired. He's on his own. Perhaps he has spent the 40 days in self-examination as well as fasting, as we are invited to do every Lent. And we know how grueling extended self-examination can be, even when we don't manage it for 40 days. Perhaps he has spent the 40 days trying to understand, to grasp, to live into the proclamation that he is God's son, the beloved. We know how hard it is to believe that we are God's beloved, and to figure out what that means.

And here comes the devil, to test him, to tempt him.

Now, in Scripture, the devil, the tempter is also known as the Adversary. The interrogator, if you will, the prosecuting attorney, the one who tries to catch us up short, catch us out in our delusions, our pretensions, our denial, our rationalizations. Consider God's servant Job—a righteous man whom the Adversary tests to the utmost limits, to see if Job will turn on God, will curse God for all that the Adversary has done to him. The Adversary is clever, and insightful, in some ways charming and appealing—and utterly ruthless. The serpent in the Garden. His job is to exploit our human frailty, and our pride, and even our humility.

And so he comes to Jesus, newly baptized, newly proclaimed as God's beloved Son. And the temptations, the trials, the testing he brings to Jesus all have to do with what it means to be beloved of God.

First: turn these stones into bread. You don't have to be hungry. You've got the power; take care of yourself. Look to yourself. Claim that power given to you by God to make all things well, starting with yourself. Feed yourself, and then you can go and feed everybody else. Think of those 5000 you'll meet. Think of the

suffering ones you can heal, the burdened ones whose affliction you can relieve. After all, isn't that what God does, who God is? And you are God's beloved Son.

But, No, says Jesus. We don't live by bread alone. By bread, yes, but more fundamentally by the workings of God, by the good grace of God. By God's free gifts.

Fine, says the Adversary. Then take a look at all the kingdoms of the world—all the peoples, and all the ways they live together, and all the ways their lives are ordered, and all who govern and hold authority over them to keep their lives ordered. If you will worship me instead of God, says the Adversary, I'll give them all to you to oversee, right here, right now. Think of all the good you could do! You could end all the oppression, and the degradation, and the silencing and control and dehumanization, in all their forms. Think of how grateful everyone would be. You know you yearn with all your heart to free them from whatever burdens and binds them. So, just worship me, and you can, right here, right now.

But, No, says Jesus. I'm not here to rule but to serve, and to serve the only one who is worthy of worship—not you, but the God who creates it all, and loves it all, and yearns for it all to be healed and whole and at peace. So, No.

OK then, says the Adversary. You are so dedicated to being faithful to God. Why not find out if God is, in fact, faithful to you? Throw yourself off this cliff. If God is, indeed, faithful to you; if you are, indeed, God's beloved, God will save you from destruction. You believe in God, right? You're convinced God is with you, right? So just try it out. No harm in checking

Again, No, says Jesus. I will not tempt God. Tempt God? Test God? What can he possibly mean? To tempt God, to test God is to attempt to put God in a real bind, where there are two good things, two desirable things, that contradict each

other. Here, the Adversary invites Jesus to put God in the bind between saving Jesus, the beloved Son, and carrying out whatever God is already up to. So, Jesus: Make God choose. And in so doing, make yourself more important than anyone else, more focused than God, more obviously and actively responsive than God. But, No, says Jesus. I am here to work along *with* God, to help, to serve, rather than to demand and to manipulate.

And so, the story goes, the Adversary retreats. He waits until a more opportune time, when he will come back and tempt Jesus again, when Jesus is even more vulnerable, and when there is more at stake than is apparent right now—more at stake for Jesus, more at stake for his followers—and more at stake for the world. We'll meet the Adversary again, towards the end of Lent.

Here in the desert, Jesus is tempted. Really and truly. This isn't just for show. It's a real test, to see what Jesus will make of being God's beloved Son, the son of the Most High, the one whose power and whose love are ultimate. There's a real set of choices here. And we can imagine just how difficult those choices are.

Because, after all, each of those temptations is an offer for Jesus to live into his divine calling and his divine identity. Each of these is a way of being God. Which he is.

And what Jesus chooses is a different way of being God—a way not of power but of love, not of might but of mercy, not of sovereignty but of service. As the Proper Preface for Lent says, Jesus was in every way tempted, tried, tested as we are—really, truly tempted. But he did not sin. He did not turn away from the one, true God who saves and makes whole. And he did not turn away from who he was called to be and proclaimed to be, who he most truly was and is.

Lent gives us a chance and a framework to attend to what tempts us, and why it is tempting. Lent gives us a chance and a framework for recognizing both our frailty and our cleverness, to acknowledge our desires and how easily they can lead us away from God, from each other, from our God-given and beloved selves. Especially during Lent, we are invited, encouraged to face ourselves, to face the forms the Adversary takes with us, and to turn from those to God, the God who always welcomes us, even when we give in to temptation, often without being willing to recognize it.

Our temptations may not be exactly like Jesus's. But like Jesus's, they come to us from beyond ourselves, in a real sense. They're suggestions, invitations, offers of things, of ways of being, that we really, really want. They're attractive, appealing. Like the serpent in the Garden, they creep up on us, ask the leading question, suggest the easier way ahead that we hadn't necessarily thought of.

But that kind of external appeal is only part of it. The other part of temptation is within us. We are, after all, frail and fallible. We're vulnerable. All creatures are. We know that others can do things to us. All creatures do. It's what it means to be a creature. But we, we human beings, are the creatures who *know* that we are frail, and who also know that we could be otherwise. In fact, God promises that we *will* be otherwise—though not just yet. And so temptations seem to give us a way to limit and even conquer our frailty, our vulnerability, our susceptibility to others, right here, right now. Temptations seem to give us a way to overcome our present humanity and be, here, now, more of who God has created us to be—and to do so without the help of God. After all, why bother God, when we can do it ourselves? And then can't we be better at who God wants us to be? More loving? More genuinely helpful? More connected with God?

I am pretty well acquainted with the temptations I face. I imagine you are too. I'm pretty well acquainted with the temptations that I've given in to. I imagine you are too. And I'm pretty well acquainted with the ways I justify to myself having given in, the ways that I hide from myself and certainly from others—I hope!—that I've not just given in but actually welcomed and embraced temptation. And I'm pretty sure I don't let myself be aware of plenty of other temptations, and plenty of other ways I've embraced them.

And each of those temptations, each of those moments and each of those habits where I embrace those temptations, is also a turning away from God, or putting distance between me and God. And each of those moments is also a turning away from other people and from the whole of creation, a putting of distance between me and others. And, at least at times, I deeply, deeply regret all this. It breaks my heart. It undoes me.

But the point of Lent, the point of the fasting and self-examination, is not just to make me, make us, aware of all the ways that we have given in to temptation, or fallen short, or turned away, or put up barriers. The point of Lent isn't even just to make me, make us, feel guilty and regretful. The point of Lent isn't even just to help me become even more determined not to give in, not to rationalize, not to indulge in regret and despair ever again. Each of these things *is* part of Lent, but because each of them leads me, leads us to the real point of Lent. The real point of Lent is to give me, to give us a chance to be even more aware of God's reaching out to and for us, for all of us, regardless. To be even more aware of the fact that I, that we, are beloved of God, always; and not because we are good, but because God is good. God is good, all the time. Even though we are not. Even though the Adversary is still out there, along with our inner desires to be more and other than we are--even though all that continues, and will do so until our deaths. "Lead us

not into temptation”—but we know temptation will come. It always does. More often than we wish, we will give into that temptation. We often do.

But yet more often than that, more powerfully, more strongly, more assuredly comes the love of God, the indefeasible desire of God for us, for us as we are, in our frail, fallible, all too often arrogant humanity. We are, even at our very worst, beloved of God. Of God who, in various forms, feeds us. Of God who, in various ways, gives us the ability and the desire to make God’s beleaguered creation a more wholesome, welcoming, generous place for all, even for ourselves. The God who, in all times and in all places, safeguards, and upholds, and embraces and enfolds us. For we are indeed God’s beloved. And God will deliver us from evil.

The temptations will come. But even more surely comes the love of God—embracing, enfolding, healing, and renewing us all.

Because they are bound to me in love,
therefore will I deliver them; *
I will protect them, because they know my Name.

They shall call upon me, and I will answer then; *
I am with them in trouble;
I will rescue them and bring them to honor.

And so we will rejoice.