

Sermon: Exodus Story and TLP 3

Exodus 17: 1-7, James 1: 13-16

The first petition of TLP, *Hallow your name*, means *Reveal Your Power, the power behind your Name*. And the second petition, *Your kingdom come*, means *Bring the world under your rule*. The operative word in both petitions is *YOUR*. It's God's power, God's rule, and God will not move the world toward the fulness of God's rule by using the ways of the world. Thus, in the third petition we support God sticking to God's ways. *Your will be done, no way but yours*.

Imagine a women's college basketball coach who is laboring to build up an athletic program. Someone, say, trying to follow in the footsteps of Pat Summitt, who from 1974 to 2012 was the Lady Tennessee Vols head basketball coach. Coach Summitt, who then died of early onset Alzheimer's in 2016, seemed to me to have great integrity. In addition to having more college basketball wins at the time of her retirement than anyone else, 100% of her players graduated college. I heard her speak one time. Someone asked her how she handled defeat. She said that she allowed herself only one day to mope following a loss. She had to get back to work. But if the loss was in a championship game, sometimes she allowed herself two days to bounce back.

Suppose some present-day women's college basketball coach is trying to be like Pat Summitt. This head coach is a person of integrity, scrupulously observing the rules that govern her sport. But one day an investigative reporter breaks the

story that an assistant coach, along with a group of boosters, have broken the rules in an effort to recruit sought-after high school players. Namely, they have bribed a couple of principals to change grades on transcripts. The head coach is devastated. She had no idea this was going on. She would have never approved. Not only has her program been derailed, but her name has been tarnished.

“But we won!” said the boosters.

“But we cheated!” said the coach.

Because desirable results aren't always the same as God's will, we can at times fall into behaviors that tarnish God's name, even in an attempt to help God bring about the fulness of God's rule. What might seemingly advance God's cause may not at all be an appropriate reflection upon God's character. If the answer on *Jeopardy* is, “Be untrue to God's nature,” the question is, “What one thing can God not do?” God cannot be untrue to God's nature.

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That the end does not necessarily justify any old mean is also the issue in Jesus' third temptation in Mt. 4: 8-10 *Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.*

*“All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”*

Satan displays the grandeur of his power in the hope that Jesus will equip himself with the devil's resources, all these kingdoms over which he rules, for his

God-given mission. This temptation is not the devil saying, “Give up on the work that God has given you.” No, this is the devil saying, “Why not use my means to do God’s work? My ways get results.” Satan is deviously asking Jesus to buy into the thinking that such a good end as God ruling this life fully justifies any mean. But God isn’t just any ruler. “*Away with you, Satan!*” says Jesus, “*for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.’*”

Trying to increase God’s rule by using worldly ways is the same as serving two masters, not one. And as Jesus says elsewhere, “*You cannot worship two gods at once.*” Matthew 6:24. Yielding to such temptation would result in furthering evil’s influence at the expense of misrepresenting God.

Even the best of intentions can lead to behaviors that are not true to God’s nature. Thus, when I pray Petition 3 in TLP, *Your will be done, or Accept no way but yours!* I lament how the ways of the world are so often thoughtlessly or intentionally substituted for God’s will and call on God to do it God’s way, none other. And one way I cooperate with *No way but your way* is by praying as a member of Jesus’ church, Petition 6, *Lead us not into (the act of) temptation*, the act of tempting God to do it our way.

The words “the act of,” obviously are not in the prayer. So, perhaps the one thing that is most unclear about The Lord’s Prayer involves the customary *Lead us not into temptation*. But why would we need to pray like this? Is God going to

tempt us to sin if we don't? Does God want us to be obedient on the one hand, yet tempt us to be disobedient on the other? Our second reading from the letter of James is insightful. And in what we're going to reread from James, the word "tempt" is *peirazein*, in New Testament Greek, the verb form of the noun *peirasmon*, temptation, in TLP.

*When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.*

Why then does Matthew read, *Lead us not into temptation*, whereas James says, "God doesn't tempt us, period"? I'm not sure, but I do agree with those biblical scholars who say that James was written after Matthew, and that the author of James not only had read Matthew beforehand, but he comments on some of Matthew's concerns, most notably by attempting to clarify, *Lead us not into temptation*. Perhaps it should read, *Lead us not into the act of temptation*. E.G., don't let us tempt you to do it our way, God, which goes along with the Exodus Story.

In the Septuagint, the Greek language version of the Hebrew Bible, *peirazein* can be translated as either "test" or "tempt." Listen to our first scripture reading for today, *The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was*

*no water for the people to drink. They quarreled with Moses, and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses replied, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?" (Or "Why do you tempt the Lord to do it your way?")*

*But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" Then Moses cried out to the Lord, "What am I to do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." The Lord answered Moses, "Walk on ahead of them. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink." So, Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the place Massah (test or trial) and Meribah (quarrel) because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord (or "tempted the Lord"), saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?" ... Has God abandoned us here in the desert?*

The Israelites weren't complaining simply because their diet and fitness magazines advised drinking eight glasses of water/day. No, they were almost out of water and had no idea where their next drop was coming from. I'd imagine that if we were in their sandals, we'd be worried also. Still, it wasn't that God refused to meet their need. Moses didn't name the place of offense "Dry water hole," no,

he named it Massah, which can mean “Test”, as in putting God to the test, or “Tempt”, meaning tempting God to do it their way.

This sort of temptation often assumes the tone, if not the words, “If you really love me, God, you’ll let me have this.” Or have you ever made a decision without prayerfully considering if what you were attempting was the right thing to do? Sure, you have. We all have. And then when you got in a jam, expected God to make things work out? That’s tempting God, is it not? “If you really love me, God, you’ll get me out of this mess that I made because I didn’t consult you first.” Or maybe we’re grumblers as were the Israelites. “Grumble, grumble, God could do it, grumble, grumble, if God really wanted to.” Grumbling also produces pressure and tempts God to give in to our demands. Yet, what kind of people would we be to pray in petition *3 Your will be done*, but then expect God to go along with our will? Certainly not people who are right with God.

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Another example of *peirazein*, “to tempt” or “to test,” occurs in the second temptation of Jesus, Matthew 4: 5-7, *Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’” Jesus answered him, “It is also written, ‘Do not put*

*the Lord your God to the test.’*” Or “*Do not tempt the Lord your God to do it your way,*” else they will pick you up with a spatula.

And here’s a modern-day example of tempting God. I have heard politicians say, “The climate is no problem. God’s taking care of it. God would never allow our planet to be in danger.” To which I have to ask, especially on behalf of my grandchildren, how is such a do-nothing response different from Satan telling Jesus to “Jump! God will catch you!” It’s not. We in the church need to bear witness that God does not magically remove the consequences of our actions or inaction. God forgives, expects us to do the right thing, and continues the relationship, but we live with the consequences.

Some versions of the Bible use the word trial in Petition 6 rather than tempt. The NRSV reads *Do not bring us to the time of trial*. The JB reads, *Do not put us to the test*. But how can we even ask that? The trial of, or the testing of our faith just naturally happens and sometimes in a big way. Ask Job if that’s not the case. The book of Job is about the testing of a man’s faith, and he passes! Such testing can be good for our faith, very good. Why would we want to go through life avoiding trials if we’re serious about following Jesus? James 1; 2-4 says, *Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance, and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.*

If I want a strong faith, the way to get is not by praying that my faith never be put to the test. To improve, an athlete puts his/her skills up against the best. To be a scholar, one has to put his/her work before his/her peers. How do we know our own strength unless our faith is tested from time to time?

Well, however you want to state the last petition of TLP, I don't see how we can ignore the Exodus story or Jesus' Temptations, namely, the good news that God helps us be faithful, does not want us to be unfaithful. Amen.