

April 2, 2017
Fifth Sunday in Lent

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Trustworthy”

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*It's a good thing to have all the props pulled out from under us occasionally.
It gives us some sense of what is rock under our feet, and what is sand.*

~Madeleine L'Engle

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Psalm 139:19–24

¹⁹*O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—*

²⁰*those who speak of you maliciously, and lift themselves up against you for evil!*

²¹*Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?*

²²*I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.*

²³*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.*

²⁴*See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Matthew 3:16–4:11

¹⁶*And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”*

⁴*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” ⁴But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” ⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’” ⁷Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” ⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” ¹⁰Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” ¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

“Trustworthy”
Psalm 139:19–24; Matthew 3:16–4:11

We have spent the last four weeks exploring what we mean when we say these words: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors...

As easily as this prayer rolls off our tongues, there is nothing easy about it. In the Episcopal liturgy, the priest often introduces this prayer by saying, "Now, as our Savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say. . ." Frederick Buechner writes, "The word *bold* is worth thinking about. We do well not to pray the prayer lightly. *It takes guts to pray it at all.* We can pray it in the **unthinking** and **perfunctory** way we usually do only by **disregarding** what we are saying." This prayer requires boldness and courage to pray sincerely – and the line we encounter today, the last line Jesus taught his disciples, arguably requires the most boldness to pray: *lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.* To pray these words is to place ourselves in God's hands and to submit ourselves to the future God has in store.

Some years ago, the writer and pastor Lillian Daniel was going through a vocational crisis. After a successful run as a nationally recognized preacher and author, suddenly things were no longer clear. As she tried to figure out what God was calling her to do, she got the idea she needed to go to Thailand. Her friends discouraged her, her family questioned her, but this only made her more determined that Thailand was where she needed to be. She connected with an acquaintance who had a house on a remote beach that could only be reached by boat and arranged her trip.

Her son was with her for a week and they had a blast. But then, Lillian's son went home, leaving her alone in this paradise...alone with God, alone with her thoughts and questions and doubts...and with an infection from a cut in her leg that grew worse by the day. Just a few days into the second week, Lillian knew she had made a huge mistake. She called the airline to book a flight home immediately. But they couldn't get her on a plane for another week. She was stuck in a place where she knew no one and didn't speak the language and needed medical care. But with no other option but to figure it out, she asked for

help, found people who could care for her, told her story, and let others help her. It was a transformative experience. In the end, she realized she had been right: she did need to go to Thailand, just not for any of the reasons she originally thought.¹

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. Eugene Peterson translates this line, “Keep us safe from ourselves and the devil.” When we pray this part of the Lord’s Prayer, we are admitting the power of temptation in our lives. But let’s be clear what kind of temptation we are talking about. It’s not temptation to small things: to choose the hamburger instead of the salad; to be snarky instead of kind; to be selfish with our resources rather than generous. Those are all real temptations, to be sure, but Jesus is speaking of the kind of temptation he faced at the very beginning of his ministry, immediately after his baptism.

At Jesus’ baptism something amazing happens. The Holy Spirit appears as a dove and lands right on Jesus. A voice from heaven announces, “You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” But right after that, the Spirit that looked like a peace-loving dove hooks her claws into Jesus and doesn’t just lead him into temptation – the Spirit flings him into the wilderness, where his only companion is the devil. The English word “devil” comes from a Greek word which means *to throw between*, in other words, to split apart. This is a good description of temptation – temptation is something that threatens to split us apart from God. And sure enough, once Jesus has spent forty days fasting in the wilderness, when he is hungry, hot and tired, the devil goes to work living up to his name.

Three tests: “Hungry? Turn this stone into bread. Want to be powerful? Worship me and have authority over all the world. Think God loves you? See if he’ll send his angels to save you.” Three tests, but if we look at them closely we discover they are really all the same: do you trust God...to provide for you? Do you trust God...to stick by you in your hour of need? Do you trust God...to keep God’s word? ***Do you trust God?***

When I discovered that the word devil means “to split apart,” it brought to my mind the perplexing word “cleave.” Cleave is the only word I know of that

¹ <https://www.theroadbacktoyou.com/podcast/2017/3/9/being-grounded-in-lifes-adventure-with-lillian-daniel-enneagram-7-the-enthusiast-episode-28>

describes two completely opposite ideas. One meaning of the word “cleave” is “to cling to, to stick closely with.” But another meaning is “to cut apart,” as in cleaving a piece of meat. So although it may be our sincere desire to cleave **to** God, to stick close to God, it is undeniable--in fact, it is biblical--that there is a force in this world that attempts to cleave us **from** God, to erode our trust in God and in God’s promises for our future.

At every baptism we say it. Melanie said it a couple of weeks ago when she baptized Kyree: “God loves you. God claims you. There is nothing you can do to drive God away. Your primary identity, the one that matters more than anything else in the world, is that you are God’s beloved.” Notice what we do NOT say when we baptize someone is, “Now that you are baptized, life will be much easier for you. You will never be tempted to do anything that goes against your God-given identity and you will never have to suffer.” We don’t say that because we know *it isn’t true*. Jesus teaches us to pray “Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil,” because he knows that we will be tempted and he knows that evil exists. We will all face impossible decisions and unexpected suffering, and when we do, it’s easy to think that this means the promises of our baptism are **no longer true** and **that God cannot be trusted** to lead us into a future that is better than whatever we face in the present. We think: I am a failure, I am unlovable, I am all alone, there is no one I can trust, and certainly not God. In those moments, our wilderness moments, the biggest temptation is to *abandon trust in the promises of God*.

Aziza and her husband and children lived near Aleppo when the Syrian war began. At the time, her son Hammed was four years old, and when they began to experience nearly constant bombing and shelling and sniper shooting, he was terrified. At one point, their village was under siege for eight days straight. Finally, Aziza decided they couldn’t stay. So she marched her family out of the war zone, going north to Kurdistan, where they stayed for several years. But things weren’t so great there either, so finally she decided they needed to get to Greece, which meant crossing the Aegean Sea.

The problem was that Hammed, who was now seven years old, was terrified of the water. He had only seen the ocean on television, and he was convinced that it was full of sharks that would eat him. Aziza tried to quell Hammed’s fears. “Don’t be afraid,” she’d say, “The ocean is wonderful. It won’t

take long. Just two hours, and then you can go to school and we're going to have a nice house." Unfortunately, on their first attempt to cross, what happened was a lot closer to Hammed's imagination than Aziza's. Their life boat was made to hold thirty-five people but was packed with twice that many. There were no life vests. People wanted to get off but the smugglers pointed guns at them and said, no, you're going. Soon after they got into open waters, the boat started to capsize. Thankfully, the boat turned back and returned to Turkey safely.

But even that wasn't enough to make Aziza give up on the future she wanted so badly for her family. She decided they would try again. Can you imagine how Aziza got her children – especially Hammed – to get on another boat after their first nightmare experience? She promised that the second boat would be totally different than the first, and she painted vivid images of their happy future in Greece. Hammed was so terrified at the start of the second journey that she pulled him onto her lap and told him to go to sleep in her arms. Thankfully, he slept for the whole trip. He slept, not just because of the overwhelming anxiety he felt, but because he trusted his mother and the future she had promised.²

The temptation for us not to trust the promises of God is not just true for us as individuals. It is also true for us as a church. Over the last ten days, I've spent a lot of time with other Presbyterian ministers. First, a group of nine of us met up in Boston to celebrate a birthday. Then I traveled to Second Presbyterian Church in Roanoke, Virginia to preach and teach in a symposium for newly ordained pastors, which was led by three friends who have been in ministry for nearly thirty years each. Every single one of the pastors I interacted with during this time spoke about the challenges the church is currently facing. Some spoke of the anxiety and fear in their congregations as church members and leaders wrestle with changes in their communities and in the culture around them. Others talked about declines in worship attendance and giving. Among the newly ordained pastors at the symposium, there was more than one who questioned what kind of future they could expect to have in ministry.

I am married to a pastor, and as a couple we have served, separately or together, eight different Presbyterian churches. These concerns about the future

² <http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/592/transcript>

of the church are not new for us. But it was helpful to hear, in such a short span of time, so many ministers of different ages and in different stages of ministry affirm what Derek and I have seen. And if these changes are happening so consistently across the country, then surely this is God at work transforming the church so that we can continue to find ways to faithfully follow Jesus and share the gospel.

God is calling us to trust God enough to follow God into an unknown and unseen future. *To trust God enough to **lead** us. To trust God enough to **resist the temptation*** to give into our anxiety and fear and despair, which can cleave us *from* God. To trust God enough to cleave *to* God, to hold onto God's promises. To do this, **we need each other. We need community.** To pray the Lord's Prayer requires boldness and courage, to be sure, but notice that when we pray this prayer every week in worship, we pray it *together*. We pray **Our** Father, give **us our** daily bread, forgive **us**, lead **us**, deliver **us**... Our boldness to speak these words comes from the knowledge that we speak them *together*. Together, we remind each other that we can trust God with our future, just as **together**, we gather around this table, with Christians from every time and place, and we receive, through these tangible symbols of bread and cup, the promises of God: to be with us, to provide for us, to forgive us, to guide us, and to deliver us into God's future, a future we affirm every time we pray.

Amen.