

Lent 1A (3/5/17)  
Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7  
Psalm 32  
**Romans 5:12-19**  
**Matthew 4:1-11**

*We've failed the test, but Jesus hasn't. From the beginning, we've made a habit of abandoning God's purposes for the sake of our own pursuits. But Jesus' faithfulness has restored us to grace, freeing us from our harmful preoccupations and calling us back into right relationship with God and each another.*

*Save us from the time of trial.*

What does this mean?

It is true that God tempts no one, but we ask in this prayer that God would preserve and keep us, so that the devil, the world, and our flesh may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great and shameful sins, and that, although we may be attacked by them, we may finally prevail and gain the victory.<sup>1</sup>

*Save us from the time of trial.*

Martin Luther's explanation of this petition of the Lord's Prayer makes a powerful statement. People of faith have long speculated that God makes a practice of testing our faith through temptation or hardship. "There are four common trials that God uses to test our faith," writes Rick Warren in his devotional blog, "and, chances are, you're in one of these tests right now."<sup>2</sup> Wouldn't you like to know which of the four tests God is administering to challenge *your* faith?

But Luther rejects the notion of a God who applies pressure in order to compel our faithfulness: "It is true that God tempts no one," he insists. Nevertheless, Luther acknowledges, "we ask... that God would *preserve and keep us*" amid the very

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism*, 500 Years of Reformation edition, 40. See Matthew 6:13.

<sup>2</sup> <http://pastorrick.com/devotional/english/your-faith-is-being-tested>.

real trials of life on Earth, a life beleaguered by evil and brokenness, or in Luther's words, "the devil, the world, and our flesh." Even if God does not test us, still we regularly face the powerful temptation to conform to the ways of the world over against the life to which God has called us. And, our record of resistance to such temptation is not sterling. **We do not, in fact, demonstrate our faithfulness to God through obedience of our own accord, but instead rely on God to deliver us from "false belief, despair, and other great and shameful sins" in spite of ourselves. God's faithfulness, and not our own, is what's at stake.**

So, we pray: *Save us from the time of trial.*

This is a helpful framework for understanding the famous story of Jesus' temptation in our Gospel from Matthew today. The temptation, so to speak, is to treat Jesus' heroic response to the devil's enticement as a blueprint for faithfulness. Since Jesus withstands the trial, then we should, too. But, **this approach to the story turns faith into a perpetual struggle to avoid the pitfalls of our own brokenness, to strive to save ourselves from the time of trial.** And, this consistently proves to be a losing battle.

No, Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is about Jesus, not about us.<sup>3</sup> The story hinges on the question of Jesus' faithfulness, Jesus' allegiance to God.<sup>4</sup> At the river Jordan, God has only just named him Beloved Son: **the One with whom God is most pleased, the One whom God has sent to show us the way, the One whom God has chosen to convey divine mercy.**

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<sup>3</sup> Patrick J. Willson, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2, 49.

<sup>4</sup> Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 106. See 111.

So, the devil's arrival is timely. It is precisely at the moment Jesus receives his identity that evil creeps in to test it. "If you are the Son of God..." the devil begins each of the three temptations, all of which coax Jesus to defy God's claim on him and instead to make a claim for himself: *Turn these stones into bread, and circumvent God's promise to provide for you. Throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple, and compel God to act on your terms. Assume absolute political power, and deny God's authority over heaven and Earth. All these temptations urge Jesus to forget whose he is, and so to forget who he is, and the sacred purpose to which he is called.*<sup>5</sup>

Not without difficulty, Jesus endures the devil's trial, and thus confirms his singular place in the human family. But, Jesus' faithfulness elevates him to a privileged position not to shame us for our unfaithfulness, but rather to benefit us: "If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one," Paul explains in our second reading from Romans,

much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.

**Even as we are marked by Adam's rebelliousness, in other words, we are also dignified by Jesus' faithfulness. Jesus manifests God's will to overcome evil and sin; Jesus embodies God's promise to *save us from the time of trial*.**

Jesus' trials, of course, are far from over. If he won't submit to evil via temptation, the devil will plot his demise in another way. The cross is the logical

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<sup>5</sup> David J. Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/02/lent-1-a-identity-as-gift-and-promise/>.

consequence of our self-serving tendencies, but **our rejection of Jesus only serves to confirm his faithfulness, as he freely offers us his very life – given and poured out – for the forgiveness of sins.**<sup>6</sup> **That forgiveness is endlessly a new beginning, inviting us again and again into abundant life.**

Dear church, we've failed the test, but Jesus hasn't. From the beginning, we've made a habit of abandoning God's purposes for the sake of our own pursuits. But Jesus' faithfulness has restored us to grace, freeing us from our harmful preoccupations and calling us back into right relationship with God and each another. "All heav'n is singing," the author of our hymn beautifully puts it, "'Thanks to Christ whose passion offers in mercy healing, strength, and pardon. Peoples and nations, take it, take it freely!' Amen! My Master!"<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 26:26-28.

<sup>7</sup> Király Imre von Pécselyi, tr. Erik Routley, "There in God's Garden," *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, #342.