

The Preaching of the Word at Williamsburg Presbyterian Church

215 Richmond Road, Williamsburg, Virginia 23185-3534

“Save Us From The Time Of Trial” **Third a Series of Sermons on The Lord’s Prayer** **The Gospel according to St. Luke 11:1-3 and 22:14—23:56**

Palm/Passion Sunday

March 28, 2010

“Learn from Jesus Christ to pray...”¹ In the gospel of Luke the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray and he does. He teaches them to ask God, “Save us from the time of trial.”

We customarily pray, “lead us not into temptation,” the old English translation from the KJV, and that is by no means a poor translation, but it tends to trivialize what is at stake here.

At The Trellis restaurant they make Chocolate Temptation: a pound of butter, more than a pound of chocolate, and raspberries. But that’s not the kind of temptation Jesus invites us to pray about. All manner of temptations may arise to lure us from our chosen path and distract us from our highest commitments, but the Lord’s Prayer is not really about many temptations, it is about the one moment of trial and testing. We’re not talking about many little temptations; we’re talking about a trial where someone must bear testimony and someone is found guilty or innocent; we’re talking about a test where someone passes or fails.

Jesus teaches us to pray “Save us from the time of trial,” because he understands that we are not very good at the time of trial; the test may be more than we can manage. The night before his arrest Jesus tells Peter, “Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail.”

Satan acts as Satan did in the book of Job. Satan is God’s prosecuting attorney. Don’t think of some scaly monster with horns, think of a three-piece suit and polished wing-tips. Satan looks over Jesus’ disciples and recognizes them for what they are: half-hearted, half-committed; following without understanding or wanting to understand. Satan offers helpful advice for personal management: let me sift them, separate the wheat from the chaff, the faithful from the fearful, the sincere from the indifferent, let me test and sift them.

Jesus tells this to Simon Peter and says, “I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail.”

Simon Peter doesn’t need prayer, however, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!” he says.

¹ Immediately preceding the sermon worshippers sang the first verse of the hymn “Go to Dark Gethsemane” which concludes, “Learn from Jesus Christ to pray.”

Satan thinks it is a time for sifting the faithful from the faithless; Peter thinks it is a time for bravado and excessive self-confidence; Jesus knows it is time for prayer: “I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail.”

Later that night Jesus goes out to pray on the Mount of Olives. Before he prays, he turns and says, “Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.” That phrase makes sense on the Mount of Olives as Jesus prepares for his own trial and testing. The real context for this petition of the Lord’s Prayer is on the Mount of Olives, where Jesus tells his disciples, “Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.”

The disciples do not pray, of course, they snooze off and take naps. When Jesus returns from his praying and finds them and tries to impress upon them the urgency of the situation: “Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.”

The time of trial faces us with the choice of faith or faithlessness, there is no other. We can follow in the way of Jesus or we go our own ways, but there is no middle way. We can live in the Kingdom and trust that the will God will be done in us and with us and even to us, or we can slap together whatever little kingdoms of our own we can manage from gluing together our own wants and wills. The time of trial separates the wheat from the chaff, faith from unfaith, and Jesus teaches us to pray that we will be spared that terrible testing: “Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.”

Jesus knows that we are not up to the time of trial. When this test comes, we do not test well, as the phrase goes. Certainly Peter does not. Three times, not just once, but three times, Peter says he doesn’t know anything at all about this Jesus character who has just been arrested.

The word translated “time of trial” was familiar to people of Jesus’ time. It always meant the final trial, the ultimate testing, but as is so often the case, Jesus utterly redefines the categories.

At the conclusion of their meal that night Jesus tells Peter, “I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail,” but then, astonishingly, Jesus goes on to say, “and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers and sisters.”

Jesus knows that Peter’s faith will be found wanting in the time of trial, but he also knows that is not the end of the story: “When once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers and sisters.” The word translated here “turned back,” is used in the New Testament most often to speak of conversion and repentance (Lk 17:4; Acts 9:35, 11:21). The King James Version translates this verse, “When thou art converted.” Presumably Peter “converted” when he left his nets at the Sea of Galilee and began following Jesus, but his conversion remains incomplete and he must convert again and again. Conversion is a life-long experience.

“When you turn back” to me, Jesus tells Peter, I have work for you to do: “strengthen your brothers and sisters”: tell them the good news about turning back, tell them they have another chance, tell them so they can tell others about the good news of God’s forgiveness falling upon the earth like the spring rain that warms the earth and makes things bloom.

Jesus’ words to Peter are a central dynamic of the gospel: I pray for you; when you turn back, encourage others. What I give to you, share with others.

Martin Luther, the great Reformer, said he went to sleep praying the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer and woke up praying the sixth.² That is to say, he went to bed

² Quoted in Jan Milič Lochman, **The Lord’s Prayer** (Eerdmans, 1990), p. 125.

praying, “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors,” and he woke praying, “do not bring us to the time of trial.” That’s a good way to end a day, that’s a good way to begin a day.

On this night/day we watch and wait with Jesus in his time of trial. As we attend his trial his Word to us is the same word he spoke to disciples that night on the Mount of Olives: “Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.”

Patrick J. Willson
Williamsburg Presbyterian Church
Williamsburg, Virginia

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