

**Sermon at St. Andrew's Church
Lent I (C) – March 5, 2022
by the Rev. Connie Jones**

Luke 4:1-13

One day, not that long before Jesus was to die, his disciples asked him,
“Teach us to pray.”

We say the prayer he taught them whenever we gather in worship.

We say The Lord's Prayer alone, and we teach it to our children.

In it, there is this ominous petition to God:

“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

Or, in the modern version, “Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil.”

From the Gospels we learn that just after Jesus was baptized,
just after a voice from heaven proclaimed him God's beloved Son,
the Holy Spirit “drives” Jesus, alone, into the wilderness, to fast and pray.
He is soon set upon by Satan,
who comes armed with temptations tailor-made for a Messiah.

Satan does not offer him Adam and Eve's apple,
but power. Glory. Immunity to suffering.
Lavish, attractive gifts designed to break Jesus before his ministry even begins,
because they require him to betray God, and the God in him.
Take these these lovely gifts, the evil one says. *And worship me.*

Lead us not into temptation, we pray. Deliver us from evil. Save us from the time of trial.
Save us, in fact, from betraying the image of God born into us when we were conceived. .

When Jesus refuses, Luke says Satan withdrew until “an opportune time.”
He will be back when Jesus, or any of us, is vulnerable. Bank on it.

Now, we could quibble about the existence of a personal force named Satan.
Call it chaos or darkness or a thousand other names.
But we know Satan's work when we see it,
and we know his hellish temptations are powerful,
wickedly new in every situation.
Go ahead, you deserve to treat yourself, his voice says. If you want it, take it.
Might makes right. To hell with the other guy. Everybody is doing it.

You and I know how temptation feels:
like a band around our chest. An itch. Falling down a muddy slope.
Like one arm being pulled north and the other south.

Temptation's voice cajoles one minute and threatens the next.
It's the loneliest place in the world, and God is nowhere to be found.

We also know that Satan's targets
are not just individuals trying to keep a holy Lent.
They're also groups of people – families, organizations,
companies that trade on the stock exchange, nations.
In fact Satan delights in targeting *systems and ideologies*,
who are far more efficient purveyors of wickedness & destruction than mere individuals.

Can you imagine the voices inside the head
of that richest man in the world,
who can deploy vast armies at a nod,
can destroy humanity with his nuclear button?

All this, the devil says, sweeping his arm from east to west,
all this can be yours!
Throw out caution and compassion and collaboration.
Harden your heart against the pain you inflict when you destroy whole cities,
displace millions from destroyed homes, set them fleeing from you,
their children in their arms!
Strike fear in their hearts. Lie to them. Shrug off their suffering.
Exult in your power for *you will be like God*.

Scoff at cartoonish images of Satan, but you can't deny he is on the prowl.
And he's wily, a shape-shifter in a thousand disguises,
with lieutenants who leave a train of destruction and pain behind them.
And remember, Jesus discovered, the devil can even quote Scripture.

We see this and feel helpless or angry. Or perhaps we excuse the evil.
Fear may creep into our bones. Maybe our worst self may slide into the driver's seat
as we reach for false security.

But then, as Jesuit priest Alfred Delp said from his Nazi prison,
in our deepest agony we cry to for God's help, and God comes.¹
Who knows? We might discover that angels have tended us all the while.

I wonder if you've noticed, in these terrible days, the presence of angels?
Polish families line up to offer housing to strangers from Ukraine.
Border guards rustle up a sort of birthday cake for a little girl just off a refugee train.

¹Alfred Delp, "Making Ready: The Our Father," in *Weavings* (March/April 2004), 23-26.

They sing Happy Birthday in English.

Tens of thousands pack into Eastern European capital squares Friday night,
in freezing temperatures, to hear President Zelenskyy address them on big screens.
A restaurateur stays in Kiev to cook for Ukrainian soldiers defending the city.
Russian shuts down the free press, but one paper shifts to broadcasting from Latvia.
His editor says, when Putin wins, the truth will still be documented for history.
Jews praying at the wall in Jerusalem wrap themselves
not in prayer shawls, but Ukrainian flags.

So.....how do we respond in evil times,
when violence and lies abound and Satan seems in control?
How do we behave?

First, we can expect that when the situation is most perilous, God draws very close.
Tell God that you belong to him.
Be penitent, not arrogant.
Name, in God's presence, the evil we have done ourselves and that is done on our behalf.
Because wickedness reproduces when it is not acknowledged.
Call on all the angels of God. Out loud.
Breathe deeply, outdoors if you can.
Get together with a friend and to say the Lord's prayer.
Forgive somebody who's wronged you. Tell them out loud.
Count to ten before speaking. Count to a thousand before resorting to violence.
Ask God to drive temptation away from you
and clothe you in the garments of Christ, so you may act *as Christ*.
Commend everything into God's hands, then turn to do the next right thing.

And how does it feel in those moments
when God has driven Satan away one more time,
and the muscle you use to resist temptation has been strengthened?
It feels like a cool breeze, or a tooth that doesn't ache anymore.
It's like being with family, or sleeping like a baby, or waking up with new energy.
It's like being in very good company, at home.
It is liberation itself.
Because you have claimed that image of God that is in you,
you know you are forgiven, and given the power to let God live, through you, in some
small way in this world.
You aren't alone. God is in charge of all of this.
And somehow, all will be well.
To conclude, please join in the collect appointed for today:
Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come

quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; & as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you & the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.