



Westminster Presbyterian Church
1200 Marquette Avenue
Minneapolis, MN 55403
(612) 332-3421
www.westminstermpls.org

*The Prayer Jesus Taught:
“And lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.”*

Tim Hart-Andersen

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Psalm 46

The annual Art-A-Whirl in northeast Minneapolis is like a pub crawl through hundreds of artist studios. We try to go every year, and we always stop in to see artist James Nutt, a Westminster member. One evening a few years ago, standing in his studio, I found myself staring at a painting showing bands of color arranged in horizontal lines.

“What do you think it is?” he asked.

It took me awhile before I realized I was looking at an artistic representation of the prayer Jesus taught. It now hangs on the wall above my desk at home, as if guiding me in my work. James’ watercolor has been on the cover of our worship bulletins during Lent and is currently in the Westminster Gallery.

I invite you to take a moment to look at the bulletin cover. Slowly say the prayer in your mind and watch the colors bring the words to life. Notice how the colors correspond to different terms in the prayer. “Father” and “Name” are both burgundy; “heaven” and “kingdom” both blue.

Can you find *And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil*? Those words are in the third and fourth lines up from the bottom.

The colors used for the words *temptation* and *evil* stand out. They’re among the largest blocks of color in the prayer. The strong red of *temptation* looms and intimidates – as temptation does in real life. The midnight darkness of the word *evil* appears as a hole into which light and hope and joy might disappear – as we have seen in places of violence and hatred in our world.

Stanley Hauerwas says the prayer’s colorful words in this line – temptation, deliverance, evil – indicate that “at this point the temperature rises with the Lord’s Prayer. Things are not right in the world.” (*Lord, Teach Us* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996], p. 88)

(You can put the bulletin away now.)

The colors reflect our own struggle to find a way through those places and moments where we are tested, when we come to a decision point in life and are tempted to take the easy win even if it leaves others behind, or where doing the right thing would mean giving up some privilege or power and we're not sure we can do that.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

The Church has always been troubled about the meaning of these words. *Why would God "lead us into temptation?"* Some early versions of this line avoid casting God in this light and render it, *do not allow us to be led into temptation*, as if Jesus hadn't really meant to say what he said because it could never be God's intention that we would face temptation.

Even modern voices have tried "to fix" the prayer here. One church member told me they pray "lead us *away* from temptation." And a few years ago, Pope Francis declared that the wording in the prayer Jesus taught ought to be,

“Do not let us fall into temptation.”

(<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/06/led-not-into-temptation-pope-approves-change-to-lordsprayer#:~:text=Instead%20of%20saying%20%E2%80%9Clead%20us,Conference%20of%20Italy%20last%20month>)

The word here in the ancient Greek – *eisenenkes* – is not in dispute. Try as we might to alter the translation, it means *to lead* or *bring someone into* a place or situation. It’s the same word used to describe what the friends do for the man paralyzed when they lower him through the roof to Jesus. They *bring him into that place*.

The watercolor’s use of *red* for *temptation* makes that word leap out. Why would God appear to be threatening to steer us into temptation, into the red place, so much so that Jesus instructs us to try to convince God *not* to do so?

Some scholars think this line should be read in the context of the early Church’s expectation of the end of time – the *eschaton* – when believers would be under enormous pressure to abandon the faith. That may be, but I think this line is personal for Jesus. The one line in the prayer where we get a glimpse into Jesus’ own heart.

When he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night of his betrayal, only hours before his death, Jesus is terrified of what is coming. He throws himself on the ground and prays, "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me."

And when his disciples fall asleep in the Garden, Jesus uses the wording of the prayer he taught: "Stay awake and *pray that you may not come into temptation.*" (Matthew 26:41)

Jesus is afraid of what will happen when *he* comes into the time of trial. After all, he has already been there. This line in the prayer echoes the experience of Jesus at the start of his ministry. Immediately following his baptism, Jesus is "*led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.*" (Matthew 4:1)

Jesus does not "fall into temptation"; he is led there by the Spirit.

These forty days of Lent are an annual reminder that the life of Jesus is framed by times of trial that he faces, each one of which God leads him into – first in the wilderness and, finally, in the Garden. Each instance tests his capacity

to stay with God and not give in to fear or violence or thirst for power.

Jesus answers every temptation put before him in the desert by falling back on God's word – this may be a guide for us. When the evil one tells a hungry Jesus to turn stones into bread he replies, "It is written: 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

When the evil one takes Jesus to a high peak and tells him to throw himself off, trusting that God will save him, Jesus replies, "It is written, 'Do not put God to the test.'"

When the evil one offers Jesus all the realms of the world if he would but worship him, Jesus replies, "It is written, 'Worship God and serve God only.'"

In the Garden, when Jesus says to God, "take this cup from me," in the next breath Jesus says, "Yet not what I want, but what you want." (Matthew 4:1-11) He gives himself over to the will of God.

Lead us not into that which frightens us – and be present when we get there.

Mary Oliver addresses the paradox of this line in the prayer Jesus taught, in her poem *The Uses of Sorrow*.

(In my sleep I dreamed this poem)
Someone I loved once gave me
a box full of darkness.
It took me years to understand
that this, too, was a gift.

We live in a culture awash in debilitating fear. Fear can be like that dark hole in the watercolor that drains light and hope and joy. Fear leads us into the temptation to define others as evil, which limits possibilities for change in them *and* in us. We arm ourselves with weapons both real and metaphoric, convinced they will protect us from what we fear – and that can lead to violence.

John Dominic Crossan argues that the specific first century temptation referenced in this line in the prayer, is the use of violence to overthrow the occupying Roman empire. *Lead us not into the temptation to be violent but deliver us from that evil.* It may be that in our time we would be helped by seeing that one of the evils from which we need to be delivered is that same temptation to violence – real or

imagined – born of our unrelenting fear. (*The Greatest Prayer* [NY: Harper, 2010], p. 175)

Jesus teaches us to pray so that we might live with courage in the midst of difficult realities and challenging times, of the sort we live in now. The prayer wants us to face our fears – and we all have them – by trusting in God and holding fast to our faith.

The psalmist understands this. In the midst of what must have been a traumatic, harrowing experience of some kind, the Hebrew poet says,

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.”

(Psalm 46:1-3)

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the tumult of evil.

God leads us into times of trial and places of fear in order to be there with us. Who better to stand with us when the world closes in or falls apart? *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.* Therefore, we will not let fear overcome our faith, our trust that God will see us through.

In Jesus, God enters fully into our suffering, to be there when we face our deepest fears, including our own mortality, as we did at the start of this season weeks ago, with the smudge of ashes.

Next Sunday Holy Week begins. On Good Friday, when Jesus goes to the cross, it will be the ultimate act of God's solidarity with the human community. *We are not alone.* We will hear that baptismal promise in a few moments. "The God of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge." (Psalm 46:7, 10a)

Jesus, in this line in the prayer, wants to spare us the fear of coming up *alone* against that which can be our undoing. It's as if he were saying, *Because I've been there and know how frightening it can be, pray like this with all your heart: lead us, O God, not into temptation, but deliver us, when we get there, from evil.*

And that's where Jesus ends the prayer he teaches – with fear and temptation, deliverance and evil, right on the edge of the darkest color, which the poet says is a gift.

We may miss those final words most of us learned to say at the end of the prayer, but the oldest Greek manuscripts end the prayer abruptly, as Matthew does. The first English translations – including the King James – were not aware of those older texts but relied instead on *other* early renditions that concluded with the praise of God, what the church calls a doxology, which then became the prayer most of us learned as Protestants.

The prayer Jesus taught conveys what we need to know as people who follow him:

- that God is as close to us as a parent even as God is also sovereign;
- that Jesus teaches us to pray using “we” and “our” to remind us that this prayer is not private, and neither is our faith;
- that this is a Jubilee prayer hoping for the time when all are fed, debts forgiven, and evil overcome.

With all of that, it is fitting that the church has chosen to retain in the prayer Jesus taught that one last burst of color at the end: *For yours is the reign, the power, and the glory forever.*

Thanks be to God.

Amen.