

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
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It is almost unfathomable to me that God leads us into temptation, and yet we pray against that happening each week in the Lord's prayer as we say, "Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil." If we pray against it happening, it means we must imagine it as a possibility, and one that only the grace or mercy of God can prevent. And our gospel story today reinforces the concept that God leads us into temptation, as it is clearly stated that the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness, into the place of testing and temptation. Somehow the time of testing and temptation serves the Spirit's purpose. Does that seem odd to you? It surely did to me and drew me down the path of wondering what notion of God I must give up or what new image of God I must embrace to put together my image of a loving, kind, and merciful God, the source of all goodness and only goodness, with one who would intentionally draw me into the dark and wild places, those in our shared and common world, or in the personal depths of my soul, where I will be tested and most likely fail at times. How can I imagine a God who loves me, and yet draws me into places of desolation, seemingly to shine a spotlight on my weaknesses, or to hold up a mirror to my brokenness, for me and the whole world to see?

The idea that God draws us, with intention, into a place of disconnection, deconstruction or disorientation can present a challenge to any who believe that if we are in a right relationship with God we will have prosperity, success, and power. It seems to be quite the opposite. If we are willing to engage with and tangle with the wild side of God, we will have discomfort, disorientation, and despair, from time to time, as God intentionally draws us into the place of testing and temptation.

So, one way I could put these two pieces together (a loving God and a God who intentionally draws me into the hard places of life) is to imagine that God brings us into the time of trial because often the times when our lives are most difficult turn out to be exactly the moments when we gain strength and clarity around who we really are. Perhaps the purpose of the testing or temptation is to help us find our true identity and purpose. It seemed to happen to Jesus in his wilderness. After his time of temptation and testing, he had a much stronger sense of his identity as the Son of God and was ready to begin his mission of healing the world, so perhaps it can be so with us. Going through something really hard may help us know more fully who we are and help us find our true strength. That all sounds like something God would desire. Famous quotes such as "when the going gets tough, the tough get going" by Joseph Kennedy or "You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated. In fact, it may be necessary to encounter the defeats, so you can know who you are, what you can rise from, how you can still come out of it." by Maya Angelou, seem to reflect this rather odd paradox that challenging, tempting or chaotic times, are necessary for us to know the strength and identity of our true self.

So, I'm wondering if we should rewrite the often-used cliché "God doesn't give us more than we can handle", which we often say when one terrible thing piles up after the other, and write it as "God draws us into situations which stretch, challenge, tempt, and potentially overwhelm us, to help us claim our true identity and to find our inner strength." So that's one possibility, that we find out the "stuff we are made of" in the hard places and God draws us there with the purpose of helping us uncover our true strength and identity. I think I'm beginning to fit together the images of a loving yet deliberately challenging God into something that makes sense to me.

Another positive way one can make sense of God deliberately drawing us into places of challenge and possibly despair is that it is in those places where God can do God's most creative work. Transformation often happens in our worst moments. Often our lives are changed for the better when we live through some tragedy or horrific event. We emerge as better people for God has been at work within our souls. In our worst moments, we may have learned how to be vulnerable, allowed ourselves to count on others for help, released our tight grip of power and control, and recognized our need for God. We may have emerged from the horror with a different sense of peace, or purpose, or possibilities, having found our redemption in that dark place, because we met Jesus there, and now our lives are more closely aligned to the will of God. This also seems like something God would desire for us.

So, it could be that the redemption in the time of testing and temptation is that we emerge with more strength and with a stronger sense of identity and connection to a God who has changed our hearts for the better.

I am certain we have all lived through times of trial, or testing, or temptation and I'd like to put a name to them but attaching them to a terminology I introduced on Ash Wednesday – our spiritual edge, that place where we are really being pushed, where we are really feeling uncomfortable, where we are being challenged and where we almost feel unsafe, with what God is doing in our souls. If we're honest and actively working our relationship with God, we find ourselves often at this edge, in this time of trial, and if we believe our gospel story today, oddly enough, deliberately brought there by God.

Because it can be so unnerving to live at our spiritual edge we often tend to allow our souls to freeze in the pain without knowing what to do next or we completely retreat from the edge, finding that easier place of safety again. I don't think either of those options is what God intends for us. I believe God takes us to the edge and invites us to allow God to breathe through it with us, so God can transform us, and we can then take that edge, that temptation, that uncertainty, and use it for good. This is how God's redemption enters our world, by us taking our hard places, allowing God to make them whole, and then offering to our world that piece of our truth. I believe this because it's what happens in our story today and it is what happened to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus resists temptation in our story (to satisfy his physical hunger, to claim a celebrity status, to have power over the worldly kingdoms) and in the Garden to "let the cup pass from him", and then does something powerful and mighty. He performs a miracle of feeding the multitude with five loaves of bread and two fishes; he offers

the world the Kingdom of Heaven to all those who will follow, and he hangs from the height of a Roman cross to save the world. Jesus resisted temptation and turned it all into good for us. We learn today in our story that what happens in the wilderness does not stay in the wilderness. It actually plays out in our lives, in positive ways.

God, through the story of Jesus in today's gospel, shows us that God can transform whatever tempts, haunts, or drives us to obsession into something good. This is the power of the gospel. Whatever we wish weren't true about ourselves, whenever we experience moments of insecurity about not having enough or being enough, whatever we feel has a power and control over our lives that we wish didn't, whatever brings us shame or regret, whatever judgments we have of people who make decisions we don't understand, whenever we look away from the needs of others and live our lives unaffected by poverty, hunger, or disease, whatever brokenness we lug around with us, whatever temptations yearn to define our lives, we like Jesus, need to face them and disallow them and declare, "Away from me, Satan". And then like Jesus, turn it into good. For there is nothing that God's creative power cannot turn into good. Just watch and see. We can choose to live a life that chooses God, which finds within the cacophony of voices clamoring for our attention the one true voice which calls us home, the one true voice which centers us, the one true voice which leads us into a redemptive way of living. But over and over again, in order to live a life that chooses God, we as faithful people must face the choice of acting outside of God. Perhaps God draws us into this place of uncertainty to give us the opportunity to claim God with a brand-new strength and identity. That's the redemptive and creative work of God and that's why I can begin to fathom that God intentionally draws us into the wilderness, into the disconnected places of our lives, into the places of testing and temptation. My image of a loving and merciful God is woven into this picture because it is only God's deep and unconditional love which can invite us – and then hold us – into these hard places, until we can emerge as forgiven, restored and healed people, which is always God's deepest intention for us.

We will still pray in the Lord's prayer, "lead us not into temptation", but when we find ourselves in that place of temptation, may we also find Jesus there, breaking it open, transforming the moment, infusing it with life-giving strength, and drawing us ever nearer to our true identity, as followers of Christ.  
Amen.