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 First Presbyterian Church of Athens
 21st Sunday of Ordinary Time, August 21 2016
 Text: Matthew 8:23-27; Psalm 69:1-2, 13-18

Deliver Us

The most arresting letter I have ever received came from Xan one summer when he was 10 years old at camp in North Carolina. It began, “Dear Mom and Dad, I almost died today.” From there he went on to narrate a harrowing story of being caught by a thunderstorm while he was out sailing a Sunfish on the Neuse River. I imagine the disciples on the Sea of Galilee felt the same way. A squall had blown up out of nowhere. The wind whipped. The boat pitched. The rain bit. The lightning pierced the sky as loud thunder cracked. They bailed like crazy. Veteran fishermen or not, panic rose in their guts faster than the water in the bottom of the boat. They grabbed the sleeping Jesus by the arm and yelled, “Lord, save us. We’re perishing!”

That is a picture of us, the church, at times, is it not? We get swamped by internal troubles: scandals, debt, divisiveness. We also fret about societal forces which threaten to undo us: people drifting away from church and the younger generation mostly ignoring us altogether; the waning influence of the mainline church in public discourse; the rise of other religions. As the church we fear for our very survival.

The storm-tossed boat can be our personal lives, as well. We may be fighting the forces of addiction. We may be defending a seemingly hopeless cause. We may be worried sick about our finances which threaten to drown us in a sea of red ink. We may have some calamity befall us like the folks in Louisiana, who could have written Psalm 69 which we heard read earlier. Perhaps the problem is simply that we are living long, growing old, losing our health and our sense of hope. One elderly woman said, “I’ve outlived my husband. I’ve outlived my friends. My family has put me out to pasture. I wonder if I matter anymore.” Despair can settle in more like a fog that never lifts than a raging tempest. We can begin to wonder if God really exists, and if God does exist, does God really care about me.

To be sure life is not easy. At every turn, our faith is tested. The Christian life is not life lived safely in the harbor. But what else can we expect? After all, we signed on to follow Jesus. And Jesus’ story is one of constant testing. He began his ministry with a forty-day test in the wilderness, up against the wiles of the Devil who sought to derail him from the beginning. Throughout his ministry he faced opposition—from the hometown folks in Nazareth who tried to throw him off a cliff after his first sermon; to the scribes and Pharisees who tried to ensnare him in theological traps; to his chief hand-picked disciple Peter, whom he called “Satan” when Peter tried to dissuade him from the difficult path he knew he must walk. Jesus was tested at every turn. His last night on earth in the Garden of Gethsemane, he was tempted to pass up the cup of suffering. Doubtless, like in the book and film, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, he was tempted to live a normal life of marriage and family, dying as an old man in bed instead of a young one nailed to a Roman cross. Jesus’ faith in God’s purposes and power was tested constantly.

And when you follow Jesus, you’ll get tested, too. And the closer you follow him, the harder the testing will be. Did you notice that the disciples in that swamping boat were there

because they “followed him” into the boat? Christians face struggles they would probably never have if they weren’t Christians. I think of those in our country standing for unpopular causes out of their convictions and those in other places enduring outright persecution. There just doesn’t seem to be any way around these trials. The only way seems to be through them.

And so Jesus tells us in the final petition of the Lord’s Prayer to pray, “Lead us not into temptation.” At least that’s the version we learn and say every Sunday. In the two places the Lord’s Prayer appears in Scripture, in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, the more modern translations render it as, “Do not bring us to the time of trial.”

“Do not bring us to the time of trial” is a better translation of the Greek than “Lead us not into temptation.” The word in question can be translated either way, “trial” or “temptation,” but in the 21 times it’s used in the New Testament only one time does it unequivocally mean temptation to sin. In all the rest it refers to the testing of faith or the putting of God’s fidelity to the test.ⁱ God doesn’t lead us into temptation. God doesn’t lure us to do something unfaithful. God doesn’t mislead us into sin. But, however much it makes us squirm, if we read the Bible we do learn that God sometimes tests us. God tested Abraham, asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac. God tested the Israelites in the wilderness, giving them manna that spoiled if they tried to hoard it. God tested Job, allowing everything he valued to be taken from him.

The writer of James lauds testing for its benefits. “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.”ⁱⁱ So God is the heavenly Olympic training coach with the stopwatch timing our laps and with the megaphone calling for more sit-ups. It’s hard going but for a good cause, to make us mature and complete, lacking in nothing. It may take a saint to see testing as “joy,” but I think there is truth in the observation, “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

Katherine Wolf is a remarkable young woman. She grew up in this very congregation. She went to college, married, and had a baby. Her modeling and acting career were just taking off when at age 26 she nearly died from a catastrophic brainstem stroke. Emergency 16-hour surgery, forty days on life support in ICU, two years of fulltime brain rehab, a lifelong severely disabled body, and a marriage challenged to survive the seemingly insurmountable: miraculously, she beat the odds—but not without scars and ongoing struggles as *daily* her faith in God is tested. She and her husband Jay have written a book called *Hope Heals*. They are touring the country with their story because they want to encourage others in difficult situations.

At one of her points of despair when she was wondering if God had made a mistake and wouldn’t it be better if she had died, Katherine felt a reawakening of what she had known since she was a little girl: God was working out everything for good and telling her, ‘Don’t doubt this just because you are in darkness now. My nature is to redeem, and restore, and strengthen. This terrible season will come to an end.’ “I suddenly felt extraordinary,” she writes, “—in spite of my terrible pain. . . I knew deep inside that my ‘earth suit’ was only temporary. I would never lose heart in this situation because my soul was not what was wasting away. My body didn’t work. That was all.”ⁱⁱⁱ

At face value, the petition, “Do not bring us to the time of trial,” is a plea for God to go easy on us. “Let us off the hook; give us a break,” like Jesus’ prayer in the Garden, “Let this cup pass from me.” Many biblical commentators, however, say it’s a request not to escape the trials

but for the trials not to overwhelm us. It's a request to have the strength to get through them. Take your pick: "Don't test us" or "Help us make it through the test."

Then comes the other part of the petition in the Lord's Prayer "but deliver us from evil." It can also be translated "but deliver us from the evil one." The Greek can go either way. We can think of evil as an abstract, impersonal force, greater than the sum of its parts, everything that opposes God, everything that would thwart us from God's purpose. Or, if you like, you can think of evil as personified, as the Devil or Satan. I'm not sure where we get the image of the fellow with horns, tail, and pitchfork. It's not in the Bible. I think it starts appearing in the Middle Ages. But one vivid image of the devil that is in the Bible (in I Peter)^{iv} is that of a roaring lion that prowls around, looking for someone to devour. In any event, the prayer is for God to deliver us, be it from evil in general or the evil one in particular. "Save us! Rescue us!"

The point is we can't save ourselves. We turn to the one greater than our trials, the one stronger than the waves that threaten our sinking boat. The whole basis of Alcoholics Anonymous is built on this principle. The first seven of the Twelve Steps revolve around the idea of reaching out to a power greater than ourselves. So it is with the Christian faith. We trust that God is bigger than evil. We know we can't beat our trials by our own wits. We know we can't bail fast enough or long enough to save our skins. Christians are people who grab Jesus by the arm and say, "Lord, save us!" Save us from our fear, from our despair, from our doubt. Save us from all that bedevils us, all that pulls us away from you, all that erodes our faith."

In the wonderful Harry Potter books evil is personified as Lord Voldemort. Voldemort is Harry's nemesis, a wizard who has gone bad. He terrorizes the wizarding world with a deadly curse. He murdered Harry's father with it and then threw the deadly curse at the infant Harry. However, Harry's mother, out of her great love for her child, threw herself in the path of the curse, thus saving Harry but dying herself. As the orphaned Harry grew up, he had repeatedly to confront Voldemort and his manifestations and minions. Mysteriously, the evil wizard was never able to kill him. Once Harry asked his wise and good mentor Dumbledore about this. Dumbledore replied that it came down to the power of love. The love that Harry's mother had for him when she sacrificed her life for his not only spared him from death but gave him an invisible protection. The evil one could not touch him.

God's love is more powerful than anything in this world, evil included. God's love is stronger than any ordeal we face. Neither tribulation, nor distress, nor persecution, nor death, nor principalities, nor powers, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from it. God's love delivers us. This is what the cross is all about. God in Jesus Christ laid down his life for us out of love. This sacrifice broke the back of evil. By it we are rescued.

God doesn't promise us a storm-free life. We will get soaking wet. We will skin our knuckles bailing. We will feel weak as kittens in our trials. Amid every squall, the question riding on the wind, riding on the breath of God, is the same: Will you trust Me? Our faith may be so little all we can manage is a cry for help, "Lord, save us, we are perishing! Lord, deliver us from evil!" Crying out for help is an admission that we cannot go it alone. It is a surrender to a power greater than ourselves. But that cry, however small, is an act of faith in itself. And faith the size of a mustard seed is enough—enough to pass the test.

The one to whom we pray comes to us when we call, smiling and gently chiding, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" We look around and the wind is still and the sea is glass. And once again we are delivered. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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- i. Joachim Jeremias, *The Lord's Prayer*, Facet Books Biblical Series 8, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), p. 29
 - ii. James 1:2-4.
 - iii Katherine and Jay Wolf, *Hope Heals* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2016), pp. 164-165.
 - iv. I Peter 5:8-9