

“What Easter Makes Clear: Lead Us Not Into Temptation”

Psalm 23; Matthew 26:47-56; Philippians 2:5-11 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might truly absorb your love for our entire beings – mind, soul, and body. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

I am excited to return to our Easter sermon series today! We began on April 12, exploring “What Easter Makes Clear.” That day, we talked about the fact that Easter underscores the central theological truth of Christmas – that God took on flesh and lived among us, up to and including dying a human death. That confession has profound implications for how we treat one another and the rest of God’s creation. The lesson we are drawing from Easter today is, if possible, even more crucial. And given the current state of the world, it is just as timely.

What we are exploring today is what Easter shows us about how God wields power and how we, as followers of Jesus, are thus commanded to wield power ourselves. This is the central message of the gospel, beyond all of Jesus’ teachings and miracles; it is not just about what we do, but how we do all of it. One might say the whole thing is boiled down into that hymn that is quoted in the passage we just read from Philippians: Christ “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.”

Or as Jesus himself puts it in Matthew 26: “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” But I’m Not Going To, because that’s not how this works. The writer of Matthew says it’s because “the scriptures” have to “be fulfilled,” and we’ve been led to believe, over the centuries that that’s about substitutionary atonement and whatnot, but what if it’s not? What if it’s about showing humanity – once again – that God is a God of love not violence, that God’s ways are different than ours, that trusting God is what faithfulness looks like even when God’s answer isn’t what we were expecting or thought we were hoping for?

What if Easter is God saying “I’ve been trying to tell you for eons that I am Love, that I can bring life even out of death, but it hasn’t caught on yet, so now I’m showing you”? What if Easter is God saying, “No, really, you can trust me that this is the way to live”?

The disciples pulls out that sword and chops off that ear, and Jesus says, “all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” But beyond telling us what the consequences of our bad choices would be, Jesus then proceeds to show us the alternative by living it out himself. ‘I could call upon defenses that would save my skin, but that’s not what we’re about.’ Did he fully understand what that was going to mean? Maybe. But if he didn’t, that makes it even more powerful. To trust that God’s got it, without knowing how it would end, that is faith.

Jesus' refusal to take up arms to defend himself is the central truth of our faith. It should be shaping everything we do and how we do all of it. We've done a pretty rotten job of keeping our eye on that ball. But we are invited to keep trying. The church got a taste of the power that comes from marrying empire early on, and we've struggled to walk away from that ever since.

“Lead us not into temptation,” Jesus taught us to pray, “but deliver us from evil.” I have long thought that those two phrases are inextricably linked. The primary temptation we live with is the urge to deliver ourselves from evil. Fear is what makes us most likely to sin. We refuse to consider that attempting to deliver ourselves from evil always, always requires that we make compromises that are themselves evil. We speak of “collateral damage” or “breaking a few eggs” to make an omelette, without recognizing that we've abandoned the central tenet of our faith.

To be clear, this question of how we wield power touches every aspect of our lives, from foreign policy to how we work in the church kitchen. Are we exploiting the privileges we have, whether those advantages are knowledge or greater physical strength or more missiles or economic leverage? Or are we willing to enter into the brokenness of the world and see what God can do there? When we say that the way of Jesus is the way of non-violence, we need to be clear that that doesn't just mean not hitting or physically hurting others. It means that we do not abide any action, method or approach to life that requires manipulation or compulsion. It means that

we humbly and repeatedly confess the temptation to exploit our power, in whatever forms it exists, as the most dangerous temptation. It means that we don't try to fill this room by scaring people with threats of hell. It means we share our facility without requiring that others who use it believe the same things we do. It means that when government leaders try to baptize deadly policies with the name of Jesus, we speak out and name those lies as blasphemy.

In the closing session of the Old Testament course I took last month, we spent a lot of time talking about what scripture is for. Somehow, we've developed an incredibly unhelpful bit of "conventional wisdom" that implies that all of scripture is good. That is to say, that all of scripture offers us examples we should emulate. If you read Ezra or Nehemiah or even some of the psalms, with any degree of integrity, you can see immediately that that is nonsense. We need to be clear about what Easter teaches us so that we have an accurately calibrated gospel lens through which to view the rest of scripture to see how it measures up. Once we are clear that Jesus teaches us to lay down our swords, we can no longer find justification for violence in the genocidal stories found in some books of the Old Testament. Once we've confessed that God is God and we are not, we can no longer pretend that our way is the only right way to do things. Once we truly know what Easter means, we are obliged to reject and denounce every form of exploitation, even and especially if someone tries to rationalize it by saying "it's in the Bible."

Sometimes the greatest truths get hidden right in plain sight. We know the Lord's Prayer so well, we often forget to notice what the words mean. Noticing the connection between "lead us not into temptation" and "deliver us from evil" helps us find new life in words that had grown dry. After the Lord's Prayer, the words of the 23rd Psalm may be the most recognized words in the Bible. And so we might miss the depth of the mystery of verse five: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." Certainly, there is a way to interpret that as smug and comfortable – "I am so precious and beloved in the eyes of the Most High that I am offered a feast while those I hate go hungry." But given what I know about Jesus, I wonder if something holier is happening here. In the midst of conflict, God feeds us – all of us, not just us and not them. In the midst of war, God doesn't see the good guys and the bad guys, God only see hungry people. In the midst of focusing on our differences, God sees what we have in common, the need to eat, and so God feeds us. God invites us to overcome conflict by breaking bread together.

When we are faced with adversity – that is, when things are hard and we don't know what the future holds and there are a lot of things making us afraid – so you know, now and most of the time – one of things we sometimes do is take inventory of our assets. And that's wise. But what Jesus calls us to do is not just list them and prepare to use all those assets to the fullest extent possible, but to discern which assets are resources that can be used faithfully and which assets are weapons whose use can

only qualify as exploitation. We are called to work alongside God to build the body up in love. We are called to join in the reconciling work of God to repair and restore creation. We are not called to deliver ourselves from evil. We are not called to pretend we are those twelve legions of angels called upon to enact the wrath of some made-up god of malice and anger. What Easter makes clear is that the way of Jesus is the way of non-violence, the way of rejecting exploitation – not doing it ourselves and speaking out against the exploitation of anyone else. This is not an easy path; there's a reason all the disciples ran away when Jesus said it out loud.

The world is constantly trying to convince us that exploiting our advantages is the only way to live. We are kept at a level of low-grade insecurity most of the time, so that we will offer less resistance to the ways our societal structures are built on systemic exploitation. But Easter makes clear that we don't have to believe those lies. Easter makes clear that the people labeled our enemies might be our dinner guests instead. Easter makes clear that power is something we share for the common good, rather than wielding to elevate ourselves over others. May the Spirit of the Risen Christ empower us to follow this path with courage and faithfulness. Hallelujah and Amen.