

When God Tests Us

Text: John 6:1-15

Hymn: "Jesus Priceless Treasure" (LSB 743)

*He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do.
—John 6:6*

In the Old Testament reading, God tested the children of Israel with hunger.

Testing. Whether you're in school or on the job and certainly when it comes to the trials of life, nobody likes a test. And yet God does indeed test us; He allows times of testing to come into our life. But, as we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Lead us not into temptation," there is a huge difference between a test and a temptation.

Temptation comes from the devil. When we are being tempted, it is Satan and his evil instruments at work. The difference between a temptation and a test is not so much in the event or circumstances themselves: The same calamities with which Satan tempted Job were permitted by God to test him; the same "thorn in the flesh" with which Satan harassed Paul was sent by God to keep him "from becoming conceited" (Job 1:6-12; 2 Corinthians 12:7) No, the difference between test and temptation lies in the goal: Satan *tempts* us to *destroy* our faith; God *tests* us to *strengthen* it.

Many of you remember from the Small Catechism the meaning of "Lead us not into temptation"—

God tempts no one. We pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. Although we are attacked by these things, we pray that we may finally overcome them and win the victory.

Did you catch the reference to that unholy trinity which has its crosshairs set on your soul? "The devil, the world, and your own sinful flesh." This unholy trinity wants to

pull you out of the protective grip of our Lord Jesus Christ. Satan has already been defeated. The only hope he has is to trick and fool more people into spending eternity with him in hell. How does he do this? He deceives us. He misleads us. Jesus is the truth, but Satan, the world, and our sinful flesh want to deceive us and mislead us, that is, lie to us, to fall into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice.

Has that happened to you? Maybe you believed the wrong thing? Maybe you were brought low or became depressed, even fell into despair? Maybe somehow you fell into a sin, something you knew was wrong, knew was shameful, but you did it again and again. This is Satan at work, tempting you to renounce your baptismal identity, to leave the holy freedom you have in Christ and return to the slavery of sin.

God does not work that way. However, God will at times allow testing into your life—not from some sadistic desire to see us in pain but out of love, because He wants to keep us in His Kingdom forever: He wants our faith to grow and for us to cling to Him more than we already do.

In our Gospel reading, we hear again perhaps the most familiar of all of Jesus' miracles, the Feeding of the Five Thousand. The people were clinging on every word of Jesus and so, almost without thinking, they had followed Him into a place without worrying about their bodily needs. Only a little boy was smart enough to bring a lunch. Nobody else. They were simply clinging to the words of Jesus.

So Jesus, lifting up his eyes and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, says to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread so that these people may eat?" Jesus is testing Philip. In other words, "Philip, do you trust me? Do you trust me to take care of you?" Philip, being a good Missouri-Synod Lutheran, immediately starts worrying

about the budget. Where are we going to get the money to pay for this? he says. How many times in our testing do we not succumb to despair over the things of this world? That's where Philip was headed.

So now resources have to be gathered. Andrew, who was trying to get elected to the Board of Stewardship, gathered all the contributions he could. They weren't much. Five small loaves and two dried fish. This is it. Have you ever been hungry? Most of us did not grow up poor or hungry, but some of us have. Maybe our parents or our grandparents did. It's no fun. It's no fun wondering or worrying about your next meal. It's no fun seeing the hurt on your parents' faces when they are worried or concerned about providing for their family. Even now, in what may be only the early stages of a global pandemic, fears about such things are entering the lives of people who have never in their lives come close to knowing genuine lack or real need.

And it's not as though before COVID-19 there weren't problems that tested us—broken families, broken relationships, trouble at school, trouble at work, trouble in the neighborhood, health problems, unemployment. Many times, God allows these things into our life and gives us an opportunity—a test—to cling to Him, to His Word, and to His promises, even more. (Jesus knew hunger in the wilderness, as part of His fast at the beginning of His earthly ministry. And Satan's temptation was actually to satisfy that hunger, but what did our Lord say? "Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." In other words, to be *hungry with God* is infinitely better than to be *full without Him*.)

Jesus shows what He can do with a little. After all, Jesus is the One who created the barley that was made into the bread. Jesus is the one who created the fish. If He

created them out of nothing, He can certainly take a little bit of bread and a little bit of fish and feed five thousand families and have lots of leftovers! Jesus in this mighty deed teaches who He is. He is God-in-the-flesh. He is God-in-the-flesh for you and every mighty work He performs testifies to the fact that He is the Son of God, the promised One, *the prophet* promised through Moses (Dt 18:18).

And the people who were there got it. They understood. They said, “This is the prophet! The kingdom of God is near!” But here’s the problem. They had a slightly different definition of what the kingdom of God was than Jesus did. At the end of the text, it says, “When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, ‘This indeed is the Prophet who is to come into the world!’ Perceiving that they were about to take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself” (vv 14-15)

They knew he was the prophet, the promised one of God. They wanted him to be their king. Why wouldn’t Jesus let them make him king? Because they had a different king and kingdom in mind. They wanted a bread king. They wanted all of their felt needs taken care of with a snap of the fingers. They wanted a God who would take away all their troubles and cares. What they didn’t want was a prophet who would come and take away their sin. It wasn’t even on their radar.

How easy it is to fall into that trap. We get so consumed by the things of this world. When things are going well, how often do we stop and thank God? Once in a while, perhaps, but not very often. We would rather congratulate ourselves. And when things are not going well, how easy it is to blame God. God, why did you do this? God, why did you allow this to happen? Why are you making my life so miserable?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we need to be reminded of why Jesus came. When we pray, “Thy kingdom come,” what kind of a kingdom are we praying for? Jesus came into this world, God-in-the-flesh, but that’s not enough. God came into this world and performed a lot of miracles—he healed the sick, he calmed the storm, he fed hungry people, he raised the dead—but that’s not enough. In the Garden of Gethsemane, He prayed so fervently his sweat became like large drops of blood, but it’s not enough. God sends His Son into this world to suffer and die for the sin of the world. God sends His Son into the world to establish a kingdom of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Jesus came and He did all of these things. He came to take away your sin. He came to do a Good Friday, to suffer and bleed and die the death we deserve. This is the kingdom that the King of kings has come to establish.

The kingdom of God certainly comes by itself without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may come to us also. God’s kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Spirit so that by his grace we believe his holy word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity.

The kingdom of God was standing right in the middle of the people and all they cared about was their belly. Jesus certainly took care of their need; he knows that the people are hungry and he feeds them. But he was teaching them something much, much greater. Just a few verses on, he says, “Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood”—unless you believe in me, God-in-the-flesh dying and rising for you, “you have no life in you” (v 53). “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has everlasting life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate manna in the wilderness and they died...I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone who eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (vv 47-51)

That's what Jesus did on Good Friday for you. He gave up his flesh and blood as an offering for your sins. This is eternal life. Do you really believe that God who would send His Son, His only Son whom he loves, to suffer and die the death we deserve, wouldn't know and wouldn't care about your temporal needs? (Rom 8:32) God is not saying that our everyday needs are not important. But what He is saying is that your greatest need is the forgiveness of sins. And by the blood of Jesus He's got that covered, literally. And now He continues to teach us and test us to cling to Christ, to cling to His Word, to cling to His promises and trust that the One who gave His life for you on the Cross knows your needs—great and small—and well provides them.

Pastor Brent McGuire
Our Redeemer Lutheran Church