

Sermon – July 19, 2020. Lead us not into temptation.

The term - Act of God - is used in insurance language in my three countries of living for a catastrophic event. Maybe an event of biblical proportions. Like the flooding in Houston a few years back - youth and leaders from Ascension witnessed a little of the aftermath. We took part in a clean up of a drain when we were at the youth gathering. We even found a toilet that had been washed into a large drain, I don't like that insurance term - Act of God. It is as though the only acts of God are catastrophic events, nothing good. And there is an implication that God may be sending these disasters, directly causing them. We have had a few pastors claiming that certain disasters were sent by God to punish people for certain sins, like the earthquake in Haiti, or Hurricane Katrina, or in Darwin Australia with Cyclone Tracy. The Anglican or Episcopal cathedral in Darwin suffered major damage from Japanese bombing raids in World War 2, and then suffered damage again in the Cyclone in 1974. It is easier to say a disaster in another area was caused by God, but more difficult if you are suffering yourself from the disaster. And that raises the question; Does God tempt people, test them directly? The 6th petition translation that we know best is - Lead us not into temptation. Now that word temptation has a deeper meaning than me walking by some chocolates in the church office - pre-covid - and praying that I just keep on walking. This petition is about testing, going through trial, something that might cause faith to waver. The more modern translation is - Save us from the time of trial. Martin Luther's explanation is - It is true that God tempts no one, but we ask in this prayer that God would preserve and keep us, so that the devil, the world, and our flesh may not deceive us, or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great and shameful sins, and that, although we may be attacked by them, we may finally prevail, and gain the victory. Luther says that God does not tempt or test, but then Luther does acknowledge that serious testing does come to Christians too. 2020 is a testing year. For the people in Canberra, Australia, their 2020 testing started January 1st - before that really - with the heavy smoke from surrounding bushfires, so heavy that children spent much of their summer vacation

indoors. Then parts of the city were hit with a massive hailstorm in which 20,000 cars were damaged, and also some homes and office buildings. And then came Covid. On Canberra radio I have heard some people talking about the 10 plagues and starting to make a count, including the hoarding of the toilet paper as another plague. I sense there will be much to lament about with the people of my new church Immanuel when arriving there in mid-October. We have much to lament about 2020 here in the United States. Each of us can tell stories about Covid time, and how challenging it can be. It really feels like a testing, and part of the testing is not knowing the future, like will things have to get a lot worse before they can get better. And Covid has just intensified other challenges, like poverty, mental illness, isolation, division, political turmoil. Who could have imagined that one such division would have been whether or not to wear masks? Luther knew about hard times that were really testing for him and his family. One of Martin and Katie's daughters died at the age of 14. And Luther was challenged by the knowledge that the reform movement he was leading led to some being severely persecuted, and to peasants rising up, and then being massacred by the military. Luther knew about despair. It's likely he suffered from depression, and also many physical illnesses. His take on this petition of the Lord's Prayer was that despair not have the last word. He also mentioned false belief. Perhaps he was thinking of a legalistic belief where one didn't ever know if one had done enough to be forgiven by God, and so there was spiritual despair. We could still be troubled by that false belief. What other false beliefs could cause our faith in God to waver? That God had singled us out for punishment because of something we did in the past. I have heard people going through health challenges say - I must be a terrible sinner that God is treating me this way, or that God is allowing this suffering to come to me. How would you answer that? I might use Romans 8 which we will hear part of in the benediction or blessing today - that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. I think Martin Luther would say - Remember your baptism, remember that you are a child of God. remember that you have been taken by Jesus into his dying and rising. It's recorded that when Luther felt overwhelmed by despair,

that he would call out - I am baptized, I belong to Christ. Jesus has the last word on my life. Ultimately I'm safe with him. This deep knowledge is anchoring, holding, comforting, empowering. Mary Roederer McCray was baptized at this font, and grew up here at Ascension, with her family. And then as an adult she met and married Mark McCray. Mark has given a lot of thought and reflection to his choosing to be baptized today. And both Mary and Mark choose for Lana to be baptized. And all at this Ascension font. It will be a bit different with Covid precautions, but there will be water, and the words - of being baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And that will lead into unfolding adventures as disciples of Jesus. I love the various elements of the baptism service, that as well as the baptism itself, include the making of the sign of the cross, today with very well sanitized hands, and the lit baptismal candles, lit by Mary McCray today, and the welcome by the congregation. We are in this together. Worshipping together here and online says that we face trials, hard times, communally. I know a lot of people find support in their trials here at Ascension. Some of that has happened through phone calls and on line connecting. Last night 4 took part in a hot Prayer Vigil, praying for people challenged by Covid and many other things. The Lord's prayer is communal - Our Father. Lead us not into temptation. And when we pray the prayer by ourselves, we are really praying it with millions of people worldwide. That too is empowering as we think of trials; so many people calling out to God at the same time. I'm looking forward to praying that prayer with you all again here today. Amen.