

SERMON: “AND LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION, BUT DELIVER US ...”
TEXT: OLD TESTAMENT PSALM 23
NEW TESTAMENT LUKE 22:39-46

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INTRODUCTION

Here’s the question I cannot help but ask. Maybe you have the same question.
We pray the prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray. And we pray
“lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” That gets me wondering
Why would God lead us into temptation in the first place

Isn’t that what the guy whispering in your other ear does, the guy with the pitchfork?
Why do we need to even pray this. God wouldn’t lead us in that direction, right?
Well, actually ...

Let’s focus on where God leads as we walk through (literally in a way) Psalm 23
I want us to pay attention to where this shepherd leads us
How the psalmist describes our surroundings ... and how that applies to us today
I’m thinking of an outline of prepositions – around, into and through

Let me begin with the one that is NOT in Psalm 23 and NOT in the prayer
But it is one we rather fancy, the route we so often take
That preposition is ‘around.’ It is one I am rather used to having grown up
and learned to drive in a city known for its traffic – Atlanta

I learned to take an almost spiritual satisfaction in finding ways around traffic,
taking the by-pass. Finding ways around traffic is a common conversation
where I lived before moving here. Things to talk about – sports, weather, traffic

I thought I left those traffic conversations down South
That was until I was talking with a friend about driving around these parts
My ministry to the larger church through our presbytery had me driving to Marshalltown
a few times. That’s when my friend asked if I used the Grundy Center by-pass

Initially I was puzzled. When I think traffic, I don’t think Grundy Center
But since she told me about the Grundy Center by-pass, going around town
by going up toward Holland and then over ... I’ve been going that way ever since

We do like finding ways around things – quicker, easier. We may even pray for bypasses.
But ... Praying “lead us not into temptation” is not praying for a by-pass, a way round,
an easy answer or an easy out. Around is the wrong preposition for this prayer.

INTO

Around is not in the prayer. It is not in the psalm. Let's look at what is in the psalm.
The psalm itself is a journey with a beginning, middle and end
The beginning is rather pleasant – green pastures so nice you want to lie down
maybe take a nap. There are also still waters – still, not stagnant

There are paths of righteousness or some translations say “the right paths.”
Sounds good to me. I'll walk 'into' that. Going the right way.
The beginning is good. So too is the very end, very good.

**You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over. Surely goodness
and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; And I will dwell
in the house of the LORD forever.**

That's the best ending possible – in God's house forever
That happy ending is one of the reasons this psalm is so beloved
Then again it is not just the locale that makes it so good
There is a table set before us. God's house. God's table

And look who's there with us – our enemies. That sounds like reconciliation
like a coming together at the end of the movie. It sounds like peace
I'd certainly be 'into' that as well. A feast, a toast to ending old conflicts
a toast to new beginnings ... with a cup that runneth over

And there is the anointing our head with oil. Think that fresh out of the shower
after cutting the grass kind of feel. Now let's eat. Sounds good
I'm more than happy to walk 'into' that. How do I get there?
Not by going around ... but by going through

**Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear
no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.**

We go through and get through because the shepherd is there with us ... in the valley
There at the beginning when we first step into the darkness
There at the end as we take our initial steps out of those depths
and onward toward that table already set for us and our new friends
There also and especially in the middle of the valley ... in the darkness

We find great comfort, peace really in how the psalm ends ... in God's house
We also find comfort, as in strength and perseverance, in the middle
of the psalm – in the valley, through the valley ... with the good shepherd

THROUGH

That's the point of the sermon as it relates to our journeys
There is no going around ... There is only going through
You going through anything these days? Let me ask that again, this time
Please think you plural (y'all) ... Y'all going through anything these days?

I would further ask you to take a brief break here about midway through the sermon
as you consider that question about what you / we are going through
Please look around, turn your head all round – establish some eye contact
wave again to our siblings in Christ worshipping online
Please picture those faces and we talk about being led through

Those faces in this Place for Everyone include people who heard the
closing argument in a political ad about how the country was in decline
how President Trump would fix it ... and are genuinely excited to see that happen

There are others, who having heard other things the President-elect has said
saying some people are horrible people, talking about an enemy within
and they are not just sad or worried ... they are terrified at how power
might be used for some and against others

And among those faces are people who think that elections don't much matter
It's just politics, powerful people using their power saying they are doing so for us
but it seems like nothing much ever really changes

I tiptoe through references to the election to say this ...
The trip through the dark valley is not a solo flight. Sheep travel together.
They're not divided red and blue. Actually, the one shepherd I actually knew
did mark the sheep to keep up with them, schedule their care

Yes, the author, David, does use the singular, "I will not fear."
But David was a shepherd, he knew sheep travel together – like a bus tour
Have you seen those tour groups on vacation? That is how sheep travel
That is what shepherds do – tour guides are modern day shepherds

And we sheep have a shepherd who is with us.
That is why we will not fear ... "fear no evil for Thou art with me"
We travel through with other sheep ... and with the Good Shepherd

Sure there are times we can feel awfully alone, in the dark
We are not. Think of other references to Jesus as shepherd
What does he do when one sheep wanders off. He finds it
and he returns us to the flock ... and to the trip through

SUMMARY

We go through together because the shepherds job is to keep us safe ... and together
One more thing about going through. It's really the opposite of a by-pass
It isn't faster, easier. It takes a while to get through the valley
I've seen horse races and dog races – not any sheep races

When we planned this series, Johnny selected the passages for each week
Including today. Timely choices – Psalm 23 and Jesus' prayer about his own
"time of trial." Luke sets it on the Mount of Olives. Matthew in Gethsemane.
I've focused on the 'through' of the psalm but I'll mention the New Testament
lesson as well. I want to share a reflection on that story I got in an email

It arrived on election day from the Ministry Collaborative, written by Mark Ramsey
He talked about the cup that Jesus briefly thought of by-passing as a cup
Jesus asks of us to drink, which he does. I think it speaks to how we get through
Not only with one another, with the Shepherd ... but also patiently,
one small step after another. He wrote ...

We begin thinking that Jesus is asking us to drink the cup he offers in one big, significant swallow. But suppose we need to drink the cup not in one big gulp, but rather to sip the cup for years and years, to take up the cross and follow for a lifetime.

Not one dramatic moment, not one amazing service project, not one big event, not one mountaintop experience of faith, not one fraught election, not one heroic occasion when photographers capture the scene just so, not exactly the right post or quote - but instead to do something humble, something small but consistent, something reliable, nurturing, faithful.

This is the joy born of faith that leads us to promote God's radical hope and to offer that hope as resistance to the "powers that be" at any given moment. This is the discipleship through which we allow our life categories to be disrupted by the persistent, intrusive Spirit of God. Sometimes, drinking from Jesus' cup is not done in one great choking swallow, but in small sips over a lifetime.

Back to the question about God leading us into temptation
Maybe God does ... but not just into ... through, not around

That is how we are delivered from evil as we pray
Not by way of a by-pass ... but by way of a Good Shepherd
A Good Shepherd who is with us in the deepest valley
A Good Shepherd who delivers by leading us through