The Prayer We Thought We Knew, Part 5:
"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

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Scripture: Matthew 6:7-15

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

Jesus teaching us to pray for deliverance from evil seems perfectly natural and reasonable. Yet, what are we to make of the front half of this line? Would a just and loving God lead us into temptation? If not, why would Jesus have us pray as if God does?

To many, the answer is clear and simple: God does *not* tempt people. Yet, there is a principle often attributed to Albert Einstein that says, in effect: "Everything should be as simple as it can be, but no simpler." I suggest we complicate the assumption that God does not tempt people before we draw conclusions. Not because I necessarily believe that God tempts people, but because I think this simple answer is more complicated than it appears.

Here's a complication.

One of the strangest stories in the Bible is that of a prophet named Micaiah ben Imlah, recounted twice in 2 Chronicles 18 and 1 Kings 22. The story takes place in the 9th century BCE when Israel was divided into two countries, north and south. Northern Israel, commonly known simply as Israel, was ruled by King Ahab. The southern kingdom, known as Judah, was ruled by Jehoshaphat. According to the story, Jehoshaphat made a marriage alliance with Ahab. Upon his arrival, Ahab threw Jehoshaphat an elaborate feast.

After Jehoshaphat had eaten and drunk his fill, the Book of Chronicles says that Ahab "enticed" Jehoshaphat to join him in battle against the city of Ramoth-gilead. This was one of several Israelite cities that the Arameans had captured, but it was never returned, even after the Arameans lost the war with Israel.

It is uncertain why Jehoshaphat consented to Ahab's proposal. What is clear is that, after agreeing to it, Jehoshaphat adds, "Inquire first for a word from the Lord."

So, Ahab summons his court prophets – four hundred of them – asking, "Shall we go to battle against Ramoth-gilead, or shall I refrain?" Now, contrary to what my friend, Rabbi Aryeh Azriel, claims – that if you gather 100 Jews and ask them a question, you'll get 110 different answers – Ahab's 400 prophets all insist that Ahab has God's full support. He will return victorious.

Jehoshaphat is as skeptical as Rabbi Azriel might be. So he asks, "Is there no other prophet of the Lord here of whom we may inquire?"

Ahab admits that there is another prophet – Micaiah ben Imlah – but adds, "I hate him, for he never prophesies anything favorable about me but only disaster."

Jehoshaphat insists he be summoned. As Ahab's court prophets work themselves into a frenzy before Ahab, shouting and gesturing about how great his triumph will be, a soldier is sent to retrieve Micaiah. When the soldier arrives, he offers Micaiah some 'friendly advice': "Look, the words of the prophets with one accord are favorable to the king; let your word be like the word of one of them, and speak favorably."

Micaiah doesn't take the hint. He responds, "As the Lord lives, whatever my God says, that I will speak."

You can imagine what happens when Micaiah is set before the kings and asked whether or not God wants them to wage battle with Ramoth-gilead.

Actually, if you think he contradicted Ahab's court prophets, you'd be wrong!

"Go up and triumph," he says, "They will be given into your hand."

Now, even Ahab is skeptical. He orders Micaiah to tell them what God *really* said.

Micaiah responds, "I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains like sheep without a shepherd, and the Lord said, 'These have no master; let each one go home in peace.'"

At this, Ahab turns to Jehoshaphat crying, "Didn't I tell you that he would not prophesy anything favorable about me but only disaster?"

Then, Micaiah adds, "Therefore hear the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing around him. And the Lord said, 'Who will *entice* King Ahab of Israel, so that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?' Then, a certain spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, 'I will entice him.' The Lord said, You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do it.' So, you see, the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of these your prophets. The Lord has decreed disaster for you."

In response, Ahab praises Micaiah for the courage it surely took him to speak truth to power and sends him home with a gift of appreciation.

Not exactly …

Ahab sends Micaiah straight to prison, ordering that he be fed only bread and water until Ahab returns triumphant. Then, he and Jehoshaphat go off to war. Apparently, Jehoshaphat was willing to *hear* the word of the Lord, but something kept him from *heeding* it.

In the end, Ahab did not return triumphant, but was killed by a random arrow that landed between his breastplate and his scale armor. Ahab died within hours and the armies were scattered.

I don't know whether Jesus had this story in mind when he taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation," but I think about it as I pray the Lord's Prayer these days. This quirky, ancient story feels surprisingly modern.

Instead of court prophets and lying spirits, we have algorithms that create echo chambers, telling us exactly what we want to hear while quietly steering our attention—and sometimes our behavior—in directions that serve interests other than our own.

Yet, algorithms aren't the only force that reduces our ability to discern or act on God's will. Even those of us who may sincerely wish to follow God's will can get in our own way.

Notice that, whether Ahab wanted to follow God or not, his desire to take back a city that the Arameans had captured and never returned could be seen as perfectly just. Likely, Ahab's court prophets felt it was a righteous cause. In fact, that's what made it so easy to assume it was God's will. And so easy to send the one truth-teller to jail.

Before moving further, I invite you to take a few moments to consider who or what your 400 court prophets are – those whom you consider authoritative, yet who speak with one voice?

[Singing Bowl Meditation]

So, here's a modern complication.

In late spring 2020, George Floyd had just been killed, and protests were sweeping the country. I myself participated in them, along with a number of clergy colleagues. I even bought this "Rev" hat [putting it on] and a clergy collar for the first time in my career so people could readily identify me as a Christian minister.

Yet, at one of these rallies, a young Black man, James Scurlock, was shot by a white bar owner, Jake Gardner, in an altercation outside Gardner's bar. When people scoured Gardner's social media posts, they found that he had posted that very morning he would have to pull "48 hours of military-style firewatch" at his bar. Some people also alleged that his bar had a long history of discriminating against both transgender and Black communities.

Shortly after the shooting, however, the county attorney announced that he was filing no charges against Gardner, having concluded that the shooting was in self-defense. My clergy colleagues and I were incensed, as were a great many in Omaha and well beyond. We decided to write an open letter to the county attorney, as clergy, demanding that Gardner stand trial.

When the letter was circulated for signing, however, I noticed that it not only demanded a trial, but pronounced Gardner guilty of a racially motivated killing even before any trial had occurred.

Now, I was as convinced as anyone else among my clergy colleagues that Gardner was a racist, and that this shooting was yet another horrific, racially motivated killing that spring. Yet,

Gardner had not yet stood trial, and neither I nor any of my colleagues had witnessed the shooting.

Both the rabbi of Temple Israel at the Tri-Faith Commons and I became concerned that we were making a public proclamation of guilt before all the evidence had been presented and considered in a court of law. Demanding that Gardner be put on trial was one thing. Proclaiming him guilty without a trial, and doing so as people who are supposed to represent God, was quite another. The rabbi and I refused to sign the letter unless the pronouncement of guilt was removed.

Our refusal sparked resistance and resentment among our clergy colleagues. One of my closest clergy friends – a fellow UCC minister – pulled me aside and said, "Be careful. Bear in mind that all the other clergy are signing this letter. If you don't sign it, you'll burn every relationship you've ever made with clergy in Omaha."

My colleague didn't warn me that my argument was logically defective. He warned that I might lose my relationships.

For a long moment, I considered signing despite my misgivings, bowing to pressure similar to what Jehoshaphat may have felt from 400 prophets and a king set on going to war. My clergy colleagues weren't an unthinking band of thugs. They were highly intelligent and sensitive. I certainly didn't want to lose my friends.

I do not think that God sent a "lying spirit" into them to entice them to cross a line they shouldn't have crossed. But I do see a spiritual danger that is more profound than insufficient critical thinking. That is, **our desire to belong can become confused with our desire to be faithful.**

We don't need God to send out lying spirits. We conjure them ourselves. "I know what's right, but everyone else is doing it, so maybe I should just go along with the crowd. …" "This isn't fair, but if I speak up, I may lose my friends, so maybe it's best not to …"

I was certainly no Micaiah in this incident. I was as convinced as my colleagues that the shooting was racially motivated. What kept my rabbi friend and me from signing the letter was our commitment to due process. That, and the memory of countless Black people, Jews, and others perceived as "outsiders" who have been pronounced guilty by crowds – even crowds of clergy – without a trial and suffered the consequences. Why would we support the very dynamic that led to such suffering just because we happened to be the ones who were convinced of a man's guilt?

Eventually, the letter's authors agreed to the change the rabbi and I called for, and we sent it.

In the end, the county attorney stood by his decision, but a grand jury indicted Gardner for manslaughter. A warrant was issued for his arrest. Gardner's day in court never came. On the day he was supposed to turn himself in, he died by suicide in Hillsboro, Oregon. A sad close to a tragic story of two lives lost.

None of us ever learned what a jury would have concluded. The certainty so many of us felt in those first days remained just that: certainty, not knowledge.

Have you ever confused belonging with faithfulness? Who are your 400 prophets? Who is that person who comes alongside you offering "friendly advice" that also threatens?

Whether or not Jesus had the story of Micaiah ben Imlah in mind when he taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation," the power of a crowd that assumes its cause is righteous can be as dangerous as any lying spirit.

And Jesus doesn't just teach us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation," but "deliver us from evil." Even in the biblical story, God may have sent a "lying spirit" to people who had already made up their minds what they would do, but God also sent a word that could have delivered them from harm, through the prophet Micaiah. They *heard* the message. They just didn't *heed* it.

Now, more than ever, when I join Jesus in praying, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," I translate those words into language that resonates: "Help me stay open to voices that may make me profoundly uncomfortable, yet still offer a word of deliverance. And help me have the will and courage not only to hear that word, but to heed it."

Questions for individual reflection or small group use:

1. Have you ever confused belonging with faithfulness? Think of a time when agreeing with people you respected or loved felt easier than listening to an uncomfortable voice. What made that pressure so powerful?

2. Who are your "400 prophets"? Where in your life are you most surrounded by voices that reinforce what you already believe or want to believe? What practices might help you remain open to a Micaiah—a voice that challenges your certainty?

3. What is the difference between certainty and knowledge in your own life? How might praying "Lead us not into temptation" invite greater humility about what you think you know, especially when you are convinced your cause is righteous?