

**Series: The Words of Jesus in Intimate Conversation**

**Today: Wake Up and Pray**

**Text: Luke 22:39-46**

**A Sermon preached by Ms. Jeanne Gay, Candidate for Ministry of Word and Sacrament  
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First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

On the surface, this passage doesn't seem all that challenging. Jesus asks the disciples to pray, he goes off and prays, he comes back and finds that they've fallen asleep rather than praying. But as always is true with the Bible, there's more to it than that!

The first question that arises for us is what it means to "fall into temptation." I Googled the word "temptation" and was reminded of the Motown group – remember "Sugar Pie, Honey Bunch"? I was also reminded that Fox has a reality show called *Temptation Island* show, and I found a recipe for fudge, called Royal Temptation. So what does *temptation* mean in our culture? Wikipedia says that we usually use "temptation" to talk about things that we may regret, actions that indicate a lack of self control, like procrastinating or eating junk food.

But it hardly seems that Jesus would be telling the disciples—and us—to pray so as not to be tempted by the Golden Arches.

No, in the Bible, temptation is something different. Another translation of the word is "time of trial." When we hear it we may remember Jesus being tempted by Satan, in the desert, shortly after he was baptized. It was a time of trial, a time when Satan offered Jesus many things that the world admires – a time when Satan tried to tempt Jesus into forsaking his ministry, denying who he was.

In the Bible, entering into temptation means succumbing to temptation's evil powers. It means being sucked into something that's way bigger than us, being in real trouble. It means times when not just our will power but our faith is tested. And of course, Jesus knew that just such a time was coming for the disciples—a time when their faith would be tested, and Peter would even deny Jesus entirely.

Another question that arises from this passage has to do with the way we understand what it is that Jesus is saying. Jesus says, "Pray that you will not fall into temptation." (In the NRSV the language is "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.") There are a couple of ways we can understand this. Is it "Pray that the time of trial won't come to you"? That's a plea. Or is it "Pray **so that** you won't be tempted—sucked in—when the time of trial comes"? That's an if-then proposition. **If** we pray, then we won't have hard times.

Sounds good, but I think that's wishful thinking; magical thinking, if you will. It's like wearing an amulet around your neck, like the ancient Egyptians did, or carrying a lucky rabbit's foot with you. It's looking at prayer like a kind of magic incantation: Say these words, and nothing will ever go wrong for you.

We have only to look at Jesus' life to know that prayer is not a magic formula. For Jesus certainly prayed, and look at all the times of trial he went through!

I had my first glimpse of this hard lesson many years ago. It was the summer between my junior and senior years in college, and I was working as a cocktail waitress. This was a bit out of character for me ... and a little shocking for some of the teetotaling members of my family. But it was certainly a learning experience!

One afternoon before going in to work, I participated in a particularly meaningful Bible study, and I prayed that God would be with me that night at work and would help me love the people I served. I went in expecting that this would be the easiest night of work ever. But it wasn't. On the contrary! A group of 20-somethings spilled sticky, sugary drinks all over their table and left me no tip at all. A man who'd been there perhaps a bit longer than he should have accused me very loudly of serving him the wrong drink. Another man decided that I reminded him of his ex-wife and complained every chance he got of how poorly she had treated him.

At the end of the evening, I said to a friend, "This was supposed to be an easy evening! I prayed that God would be with me!" And even as I said it, I knew. God **was** with me. God doesn't promise us **easy** lives. But God **had** been with me, and perhaps the evening was easier than it would have been had I not prayed, or perhaps in some way I was able to love my obnoxious customers in ways I wouldn't have been able to do had I not been so conscious of being with God.

No, I don't think that Jesus is telling us that prayer will magically make our lives easier, though he may well have hoped that his disciples, his good friends, would not have to go through times of trial. We earthly parents do the same thing—we want to protect our children from times of trial, temptations. I remember hearing that a couple I knew had pulled their first-grader out of school to home school him ... because kids on the school bus were using curse words. They later realized that he was going to hear those words in his life and that perhaps they might have done better to talk with him about why they didn't want him using the words—that instead of hiding him away from all sources of temptation, they might have been better off giving him tools so he would be able to resist the temptation.

Jesus knew that even he could not protect his disciples from all temptation, just as he knows that we will encounter temptations in life. But he gave his disciples (and gives us) a tool—prayer—that will allow us to resist temptation, to get through the times of trial without

forsaking our faith, without giving up on ourselves as the children of God we were created to be.

And how does prayer do that? Prayer is not a magic formula, but prayer tunes us in to God. Prayer sensitizes us to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Have you ever watched people who've been married for a long time, or even friends for a long time? Have you noticed how sometimes they almost anticipate each other's thoughts? As a child growing up, I was always amazed at the way my parents could look at each other at the dinner table and communicate with almost no words. My mother would say, "Have you thought about ... ?" and my dad would respond, "Yes, but I think not yet." We kids would look back and forth, and they'd just smile.

How could they do that? Only because they had already been communicating – a lot. They asked each other questions, and they listened to each other. This is what prayer does for us in our relationship with God.

Look at this prayer that Jesus prayed. He started out by saying, *whoa, God, I'm wishing this thing wouldn't have to happen.* "Take this cup from me," he asked. When we follow this model, we tell God about our fears, our desires. You know what yours are. Worry about your job or your savings, fears about your health or your next year in school. Dreams of a wonderful relationship, of children's fulfilling futures, of meaningful work.

And then Jesus said, *But I'm putting it in your hands, God.* "Yet not my will but yours be done." Jesus acknowledged that God had a plan that was bigger than his fears, and that God knew what was best. As you know, I've been in the process of seeking a call as a pastor over the last several months. And I've been going to God almost every day saying, *God, what if I don't find something? What if the timing doesn't work out?* And then I've been able to say, *Okay, you know all this, and it's in your hands. And you've already got the right church for me picked out. Your will be done.*

And finally in this model, even though Luke doesn't mention it specifically, it's clear that Jesus listened to God. And he was strengthened for what came next. This is the part that's most difficult for us sometimes, but it's important, for this is when we acknowledge that we are not ultimately in charge of our lives. We listen, because we believe that God has something to say to us.

And when we listen as we pray, we learn to hear God's voice. We become sensitive to the still, small voice of the Spirit. And so when we do come into those times of trial, even in the midst of our panic, even if we are in despair, we are still in communion with our Lord. And even though we are faced with temptation, we **know** that God is with us. And we do not succumb.

When Jesus finished praying and went back to the disciples, he found that they had fallen asleep. Luke says they slept because of their grief. I think we can understand that. There are times when we'd like to retreat, to just get away from all the problems. But Jesus had a message for the disciples, and he has one for us: Wake up, fellow disciples, and pray.

Amen.