Palm Sunday, April 4, 1993
PALM SUNDAY TEMPTATIONS (No. 3 in a Series: Lord's Prayer)
Matthew 21:1-11

In the Lord's Prayer, we pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." A frequent question people ask me about this part of the Lord's Prayer is: "Why do we ask God to refrain from leading us into temptation? Would God ever deliberately or even unwittingly cause us to be tempted?"

My answer to them is: "No, God never deliberately leads anyone into temptation, nor does God tempt anyone. God is life, light, and love." This phrase, "Lead us not into temptation" in the Lord's Prayer is an unfortunate English translation that first appeared in the King James Version of the Bible. A more accurate translation from the Aramaic language that Jesus used would be: "Do not let us enter into temptation," or "Keep us from being tempted," or even "Help us overcome temptation so that we are delivered from evil."

All of us are familiar with temptation, and from the Gospel stories, we know that Jesus was well aware of it too. He had been tempted many times in his life. He knew how dangerous temptation could be — how subtle, how beguiling, how alluring.

Palm Sunday is a good example. On this day, people were calling him their new king, a leader who would take charge and free their nation from the Roman conquerors. How wonderful it is to be applauded by the crowd. And what a temptation it is to be what the crowd wants you to be. We know about that. Each one of us faces that temptation almost daily.

The people in the crowd were also tempted. Their temptation was to remake Jesus into what they wanted him to be rather than accept who he was. When he spoke of victory, they thought of victory in battle. When he spoke of liberty, they thought of political liberty. When he spoke of strength and power, they thought of armed forces and weapons of destruction. But he was speaking of the strength that comes from within. How tempting it is for all of us to see things the way we want them to be and never question our basic assumptions. It's tempting to confuse our will with God's will.

This is where this phrase in the Lord's Prayer connects with Palm Sunday. Our prayer is that nothing will become a temptation to us, and when it does, we pray for the strength to resist that temptation, so we are delivered from doing evil.

Jesus knew that life in this world is filled with temptations and that allowing our temptations to take control can separate us from God and lead us to rely on false gods, which always fail us in the end.

We hardly ever separate ourselves from God by standing up, shaking our fists, and renouncing God with planned defiance. Most often, the decision against God is made gradually, almost unnoticed. The same thing can happen in a marriage. People gradually grow apart, a little bit each day, until they discover that nothing is left between them. Or we find ourselves being tempted by another person outside our marriage, and we don't even recognize it as a temptation. Gradually, we allow ourselves to be pulled away into another relationship.

Isn't it true that things that are blatantly and easily recognizable as evil seldom tempt us? Rather, it is the seemingly good and noble causes that can tempt us away from God or come

between us and God. Anything can become a temptation. Anything can become a false god — the drive for success, the accumulation of power and money — even though we tell ourselves that we are going to use this personal power for just causes.

Temptation most often comes dressed up in the most alluring clothes. The tempter does not say, “Come, I’ll teach you something evil, or I’ll show you a most enjoyable sin.” Rather, the temptation is, “Come, I will teach you something interesting and exciting that will add a whole new dimension to your life and make you somebody really important.”

Jesus did not say, “It is impossible for a beggar to enter the Kingdom of God.” He did say, “How difficult it is for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God.”

Remember, the tempter in the wilderness made nothing but grand and captivating proposals to Jesus. He appealed to his idealism, to his piety, to his desire to do good, and even to the Word of God. The tempter suggested to Jesus the incredible idea of controlling all of humanity by offering him all the kingdoms of this world. In so doing, the tempter hoped he could separate Jesus from God.

When we give in to the temptation to do something without God, it may result at first in great success. The worship of success is the most tempting false god of all. Soon we believe that we are responsible for everything that has happened, and then it’s easy to become separated from God. Now, let’s be more specific about Palm Sunday and its unique temptations.

First of all, Palm Sunday reminds us of the alluring temptation of trusting too much in the sensational, in action all by itself, in that which appeals to emotions and leaves reason behind. I love a parade as much as anyone — with flags flying, bands marching, and crowds cheering. It’s exciting. We need the celebrative times that Palm Sunday represents. Festivals and parties are part of the joy of life.
However, the temptation is to believe that this is where the action is, that with enough shouting and cheering, enough media coverage, enough fame, we will solve the problems in the world. If we can only have enough rallies, enough demonstrations, we can make things better. Jesus was not fooled by what was going on around him, even though he accepted the enthusiasm and devotion of the people in the crowd.

Second, Palm Sunday reminds us of the temptation to believe that only a hero or heroine can save us. A popular theme in literature is to have a hero or heroine come to the rescue. A town, tribe, or nation is in trouble. The evil people have gotten control. There is no one available to throw the bad people out. Then the hero arrives. In movies with a western theme, he is a tall man, wearing a white hat and riding a white horse, two guns on his belt, and single-handedly, he defeats the enemy and the town is free once more.
Many of the people in the crowd on Palm Sunday believed that with the right leader, a new king, Israel would be restored to its former glory as a world power, as it had been under King David. But Jesus knew otherwise. One gospel writer reports that when Jesus drew near the city and heard the crowds, he wept over it, saying, “Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace. But now they are hidden from your eyes.” He knew that many of the same people who on that day were hailing him as the new king would a few days later be in the crowd, shouting, “Crucify him.”

This is not to deny that good leaders in any enterprise — be it politics, business, labor, or the church — are vital and necessary. But no one ever does it all alone. To give in to the

temptation that our hero or heroine will save us is to attempt to avoid any responsibility we might have.

A third temptation illustrated by Palm Sunday is our tendency to oversimplify the enemy. Many people in the crowd on Palm Sunday believed that if Jesus would become their new king and lead the revolution to throw out the hated Romans, all their problems would be solved, and the Kingdom of God on earth would be established.
There is rarely, if ever, one simple solution to any complex problem — whether that problem be too many teenage pregnancies, drug abuse among young people, homelessness, the increase in crime, containment of costs in healthcare, peace in the Middle East, or in many of the formerly communist countries. Yet simple solutions are always tempting. “Build more prisons and put more criminals there for life — that will solve the crime problem.” “Use capital punishment more frequently. Kill more criminals. That will solve the problem of crime.” If only it were that simple or easy.

Even in our personal lives, we are tempted to believe that the right person will solve most, if not all, of our problems.

Here’s a marriage that has lost its vitality. A new lover is found, and now all problems are solved.

There is always the temptation to see the enemy as someone else, as something completely outside ourselves. We are part of the problem and can also be part of the solution to the problem.

In so many places in life, the issues are not black or white. So many times, there is no one clear answer. Especially this is true in many personal decisions.

Should we use extraordinary means of life support? When? Almost every time a family experiences a crisis of health on the boundaries of life and death, this question is posed.

So much of life is ambiguous. As a loved one suffers from terminal cancer, do we pray for life or death? As a spouse receives a promotion that would enhance his or her salary but mean pulling up stakes and moving to an unknown place, do we pray for promotion or stability?

There are temptations in both directions, just as Palm Sunday is both triumph and tragedy, and Jesus is both servant and savior.

We can understand why we need to pray, “Keep us from giving in to temptation and deliver us from evil.”

Keep us from giving in to the temptation that we are always right and others wrong. Keep us from giving in to the temptation of believing that God is only on our side because we are righteous and everyone else is evil.

But in spite of the temptations that Palm Sunday illustrates, we can at the same time carry on our celebrations. There is a place in our faith, and in life itself, for enthusiasm, for overflowing devotion, for shouting hosanna.

Although enthusiasm and devotion can be misused and misappropriated, that does not invalidate them. Jesus admired and accepted the devotion of the crowd, even though he could

see beyond it. It was the self-righteous, grim, repressive attitude of the over-religious that Jesus frowned upon. And there were those in the crowd on Palm Sunday.

Some people said, “Tell your followers to be more decent and orderly.” But Jesus replied, “I tell you, if they were silent, the very stones would cry out.”

So it is that Palm Sunday and the phrase from the Lord’s Prayer, “Keep us from giving in to temptation,” connect. Later that same week, several days after Palm Sunday, when Jesus was praying alone, he found his disciples asleep. His advice to them was, “Watch and pray, that you may not enter into temptation.”

The only way to overcome temptation is through prayer, by keeping one’s relationship with God alive and healthy. We cannot overcome it by our own power. So long as we stand within God’s field of power, no power can overtake us.

The ultimate temptation is to be with Christ on Palm Sunday, but not on Thursday or Friday of Holy Week. The temptation is to avoid the crosses in life, to stay away from those who suffer, and to believe there is such a thing as completely painless progress. The temptation is to stay away from self-denial.

Self-denial does not mean self-abasement with the attitude, “I am nothing,” or “I am a worthless sinner.” Rather, self-denial means a willingness to be involved in the spiritual and social solutions in society. In the Lord’s Prayer, when we pray, “Deliver us from evil,” we are not asking to be delivered from all grief, pain, sorrow, or failure, but from evil.

Today on Palm Sunday, when we pray, “Help us to overcome temptation and deliver us from evil,” we are asking God to move deeply into our lives so that we will be able to deal with the many temptations that come our way, and at the same time celebrate the good news that Christ brings. Amen.