

**J.D. Ousley**  
**Sermon—10Mar19**  
**Lk. 4.1-13**  
**“Safety Net”**

*In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.*

I recently saw a photo someone had posted on Facebook that made me dizzy!

The photo showed a walkway that had been constructed along the side of a cliff. In some areas, the walkway descended sharply via a set of stairs.

The most unusual feature of the walkway, though, was that its floor was made of clear glass! Which meant that if you happened to look down, you would see hundreds of feet below you--all the way to the bottom of the cliff!

I admit that I'm not terribly comfortable being at the top of high places to begin with. I can sympathize with those who would pass up an opportunity to stroll along the side of the cliff. Who knows if the walkway might suddenly collapse???

Fear of falling is at the heart of the drama described in the story of the Temptation of Christ that we heard in today's Second Lesson.

In the story, Jesus is being tempted by the devil. For the third temptation, the devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem, and he places him on the pinnacle of the temple, the highest building in the city. The devil then challenges Jesus. He says to Christ, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here."

As the devil notes, the Bible says that God "will command his angels" to save Jesus.

The original Bible quotation appears in today's Psalm 91: "For he shall give his angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. They shall bear you in their hands, lest you dash your foot against a stone." Since Jesus is the Messiah, if he jumped, God would save him.

But Jesus isn't about to play the devil's game. He answers the devil with another quote from Scripture, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

And when we think about it, Christ's response to the devil makes good sense. We should ask God to help us only when we really need help.

Surely, God doesn't want us to jump off of high buildings just to test his love for us. It would mock God if we did dangerous things to see if God would perform miracles on our behalf.

Of course, we don't have to worry that we will be faced with the temptations that Jesus faced. The devil isn't likely to pursue us for forty days in the wilderness.

Nevertheless, there is another message here, and it's about a different kind of "falling." For haven't you been afraid of "falling" in the sense that you were afraid of *failing*?

Perhaps you're a successful stock trader, for example, who is riding a win streak. You're glad that you've done so well, but you know that win streaks don't go on forever. You have started to become afraid that you'll make some bad trades and wind up losing the money that you have earned.

These sorts of fears are perfectly rational. We'll always have them because we live in a world where the future is unpredictable.

But, for Christians, fear isn't the whole story. While we will have fears like everyone else—and while the world is just as unpredictable for us Christians as it is for everyone else—still, we God to rely on.

Here's an analogy of what I'm talking about. When I watch circus performers in high-wire acts like swinging on a trapeze or walking on a tightrope, I find them pretty scary. I'm relieved, though, if I notice that the performers have a net beneath them.

I realize that it is braver to perform without a net. And, of course, circus artists who risk their lives might be more thrilling to watch. Still, on balance, I'm grateful that the net is there, and I can be assured that the circus artists will survive to the end of the show!

This provides a good image for how our faith works: it gives us a *spiritual safety net*. The grace of God is always beneath us to catch us if our faith falters in a moment of crisis.

When I was in seminary studying for the ministry in the 1970's, there was a great emphasis in the school on small group learning. Leaders of groups often conducted exercises that were intended to build up trust among members of the group.

I particularly remember a game that we played in one of my classes. A student would stand up, close her eyes, and then lean back until she lost her balance. Members of the group would hold a blanket behind the person and catch her before she hit the ground.

I found this exercise to be daunting—but surprisingly effective. After I had taken my turn and leaned back and been caught by my fellow students, I had a very positive feeling toward them. And, going forward, I could have a new confidence in my colleagues, and this confidence applied to the other interactions that I had with my group.

Again, there is an analogy that applies to *God*. For, as the Bible teaches, God is always with us to catch us if we fall.

God can even help us when we have *psychological* fears of “falling.” Some people may find that their anxiety is so severe that it provokes in them feelings of vertigo.

They may experience a similar dizziness to looking over the edge of a cliff. That dizziness can be a sign that they are having a panic attack.

Here, once again, the Bible's promise can be crucially helpful. The God whom we depend on can keep us from falling *mentally*. For instance, one thing that we can do when panic threatens is to pray for God's help.

The Great Litany that we sang at the beginning of the service is a perfect way to pray. It allows us to refocus ourselves on our God who gives us a never-failing safety net. We sing again and again, “Good Lord, deliver us.”

This is a perfect prayer when fears and anxieties beset us. “Good Lord, deliver us.” This is a perfect prayer when we need to remember that God is always ready to hold us in the safety net that only God can provide. “Good Lord, deliver us.”

*Amen.*