

Temptation: It's a Test

Lent 1 a
Matt. 4.1-11

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The temptation of Jesus in the wilderness raises an issue that Christians aren't exactly fond of. Namely, that God tests us. And if you've thought that it was the devil doing that all along, then you've missed something really important here. The first verse of the gospel for today clearly says that Jesus was sent into the wilderness "by the Spirit" in order "to be tempted."

It's God who tests us. It's God who wants to know how we will handle temptation. It's God who wants to know what is truly in your heart, even as I talked about it on Ash Wednesday. It's God who wants to know if you will indeed love him and follow his commandments.

Says Psalm 11: "The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord's throne is in heaven. His eyes behold, his gaze examines humankind. The Lord tests the righteous and the wicked..." (vv.4-7).

In other words, God is watching you, to see whether you will act upon the faith that you say that you have.

And no one is exempt from this. The testing of Jesus in today's gospel ought to tell you that. The Bible tells of numbers of other people who were tested -- people we would consider "pillars of the faith."

Abraham was tested by God in the famous story of the sacrifice of Isaac. The son that Abraham had so longed to have, and had waited 25 years to receive in his old age, was to be sacrificed so that God would know whether Abraham's desire for that son was greater than his love of God (Gen.22).

Young Joseph was tested by God, after being blessed with gifts of dreams and insight to interpret them. Yet those gifts didn't keep him from being severely tested when his eleven brothers sold him into slavery. Says Psalm 105, "His feet were hurt with fetters, his neck was put in a collar of iron; until what [God] had said came to pass, the word of the Lord kept testing him" (vv.18-19).

In the New Testament, Jesus tested Philip's faith before the feeding of the 5,000 by asking him how they should feed all these people (Jn.6.5-6).

Jesus warned all his disciples that they would be tested by his arrest and trial. But none of them believed his warning. Peter protested loudly that he would rather die than deny him or fall away from him, and they all said the same (Mk.14.13).

Jesus warned Peter, James, and John a second time in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial." He ended that warning with a phrase that we have all identified with: "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mk.14.38).

God does not just stop with testing individuals when it comes to faith. He tests whole peoples as well.

The people of Israel, as God's chosen, were tested on numerous occasions. They were tested by their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. They were tested by the apparent lack of food and water while there (Dt.8.2-5). They were tested by their pagan neighbors after they came into the Promised Land (Jg.2.22-23). They were tested by their defeat and deportation to Babylon many years later (Zeph.13.8-9).

Even individual churches were known to be tested in the New Testament by persecutions and false prophets. Such was the case for the church addressed by letters of Peter and James and Jude.

It is no different for us today than it was for those described in the Bible. God is in the business of testing the faith of individuals and churches. God wants to know exactly what he wanted to know in Bible times: What is in your heart? What truly motivates you? Will you follow God's lead and God's commands, or is your heart and your faith following something else?

It's not exactly a comforting notion that each of us will be tested -- especially considering the nature of the tests. Because I can assure you that the tests will not be easy. Remember Abraham was asked to give up his only son. Joseph was asked to endure in prison and in slavery. St. Paul was asked to take beatings, stonings, shipwrecks, and plots against his life (2 Cor.11.24-28). And the early churches were asked to endure persecutions that included getting mauled to death by lions.

Perhaps some of these ancient travesties no longer exist, but I will tell you what does exist that can amount to quite a test indeed. Your weakness exists: that particular area that each of you has in your life that you know is no good for you -- and yet you are constantly tempted by it.

St. James spells it out clearly: "One is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death" (Jas.1.13-16).

It's a matter of desire versus faith. That's the test that is most frequent. That's surely the test that Jesus endured in today's gospel: the desire for food after 40 days of fasting; and the hunger for power that is natural to so many. When we are tested, we will be tested at our weakest point, at the point of our desire.

Sound scary? Your trust in God should be a consolation.

Happily for you and for me, the passing of these tests isn't the whole ballgame. The scriptures tell us this also. The Israelites blew their tests with God again and again. And yet, as soon as they turned to God in repentance and faith, God was ready to have mercy and forgive and help them (Judges 3).

The book of Hebrews says the same thing. "Since ... we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb.4.12-16).

At the same time, St. Paul promises, "No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your

strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it" (1 Cor.10.13).

With all of this in mind, I can't help but wonder if we here at Holy Cross have entered a time of testing by God. It surely is the case that we have been wonderfully blessed in these past two and a half years as we've grown closer to God. The blessings have abounded. Our renewal in faith, a new sense of direction, a new sense of unity, an end to bickering, new members constantly coming among us, an increase in our Food Pantry ministry, an increase in our closeness with our Preschool ministry, an increase in regular offerings and the astounding achievement of \$260,000 in pledges for our Grow Holy Cross capital campaign.

But now, just as we are focusing on moving toward a call process later this year, we seem to have hit a bit of a bump in the road. Some anxiety has come into our midst. And anxiety is always a test, you know.

And the anxiety test is this, "Will we still trust God?" "Will we let God lead, or will we take the reins from God and try to lead ourselves?" Or put another way, "We will put ourselves ahead of God instead of putting God first, as the Commandments and our Be Faithful list tell us to do?"

In your bulletin for today is an insert that is titled, "Prayer for the Holy Spirit." Please take it out so that we can pray it together. This prayer is written to help us in this time of testing. We need to make good choices, for our ministry and for our future, particularly as we look forward to going into a call process and celebrating our 50th anniversary this year. So let us call down the Holy Spirit to help us with those choices.

Let us pray.

L God of light and love and wholeness, God of our past and God of our future, send us, we pray, your life-giving Holy Spirit.

C Come, Holy Spirit.

L Fill our hearts with the Spirit's love.

C Come, Holy Spirit.

L Fill our hearts with faith burning brightly for love of you.

C Come, Holy Spirit.

L Fill our hearts with love for one another.

C Come, Holy Spirit.

L Drive from us all our fears and anxieties and distresses.

C Come, Holy Spirit.

L Drive from us any evil that prevents faith from taking hold in our hearts and in our church.

C Come, Holy Spirit.

L Forgive us our failings and renew our lives.

C Come, Holy Spirit.

L Replace all selfishness, pride, or self-concern with a fullness of your Spirit in every corner of our hearts and our church.

C Come, Holy Spirit.

L Replace our uncertainty with the certainty of faith.

C Come, Holy Spirit.

L Replace our lack of focus with direction and hope.

C Come, Holy Spirit.

L Lead us all by your will alone.

C Come, Holy Spirit.

L Bless our church, our leaders and our ministry.

C Come, Holy Spirit.

L Fill us up, Lord, fill us up with faith so full that we cannot keep from sharing it.

C Come, Holy Spirit.

L Fill us up with your Spirit so that all who see us will know the power of your love.

C Come, Holy Spirit.

L Come, Holy Spirit, descend upon us now.

C Come, Holy Spirit.

L Come, Holy Spirit.

C Come, Holy Spirit.