

First Sunday in Lent – 2024

Genesis 22:1-18

James 1:12-18

Mark 1:9-15

How many of y'all have ever been tested? I'm not talking your third grade teacher and your times tables or the SAT or the ASVAB or if the good-lady-wife ever asked you if the dress that she was wearing was unflattering. Does God ever put an ordinary schlub like me to the test? Dan Quayle was no JFK and I'm no Abraham but that doesn't mean that God doesn't put each of us to the test. How many of y'all know for certain that God puts us to the test? Every adult hand ought to go up. Do we even know when we're being tested or do we only realize such things once they're in the rear view mirror? When you go through hard things, do you think to yourself: "What in blazes is God up to? What am I supposed to learn here? What sin, what vice is He exposing that He wants changed?" Man often doesn't know what virtue is being tested when he first encounters difficulty. Is God looking for compassion or boldness? Am I supposed to learn patience here or is there some rubbish in my character that is to be repented of right now?

None of you came out of your mother's womb with a full assortment amazing virtues. God is a refiner's fire (Malachi 3:2). So wrote the Prophet Malachi. Fire is used to remove impurities from metals. Does God do that with you? What do you call a child who does not like to be disciplined? Ordinary. What do you call a parent who does not discipline their child? Negligent. You and I may be ordinary but God is not negligent. Here's a line from Proverbs: "The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and the Lord tests hearts" (Proverbs 17:3). Here's a line from Psalm 66: "For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried" (Psalm 66:10). There is a very big difference between testing and tempting and now we have come to a theological point that will very much help you interpret your life. God tempts no one (James 1:13). So wrote St. James. But God does indeed test and try us. Martin Luther wrote this: "God does not test in order that we may fear and hate Him like a tyrant but to the end that He may exercise and stir up faith and love in us. Satan, however, tempts for evil, in order to draw you away from God and to make you distrust and blaspheme God" (AE 4:132).

So there's Abraham, the man of faith (Galatians 3:9). Where did his faith come from? God breathed it into him, right? Yes, right. By the power of His Word, God breathes into us the faith that He desires. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ (Romans 10:17). Faith is a gift (Ephesians 2:8). Faith is the Holy Spirit in action. Faith is apprehending that the gospel is true. Our joyous assent then confesses to any and all what is true. Here I stand; I can do no other. God knew the heart of Abraham because God had forged (refined) the heart of Abraham. That faith, the faith which God credited to Abraham as righteousness, came from God's own action (Romans 4:3). God was testing Abraham, looking for the righteousness that God Himself gave Abraham. God documents His faithfulness to us by testing us. In difficulty, one of the products of faith is that it flees to God, begs Him for help, acknowledges Him as our good and gracious God.

Satan tempts. He does not teach anything except that which is faithless, empty, worldly, and self-centered. Satan tempts you in order to curve you in on yourself, to prompt you to abandon

what is holy, to seek more and more of yourself, more and more of the world, more and more of what is laden with vanity and pride and darkness and death. Satan is real. His methods are diverse. His goal is always the same. You have been tested by God and you have been tempted by Satan. God tests for approval. Satan tempts for failure.

Still dripping baptismal water, Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the desert. Continuously, for forty days, Jesus is tempted by Satan. Jesus is fasting. Israel wandered in the desert for forty years. Jesus, as the New Israel, is replicating the experience of God's people. Israel fell to temptation. Israel whined and rebelled and capitulated to temptation. At every point where Israel failed, Christ triumphs. At every point where you fall, your Savior stands victorious. All that He is, all that He has done has been for you. The life of Jesus Christ is what defines you before the Father. Christ's righteousness, His charity, His devotion, His love, His death and His resurrection becomes yours – that's what it means to be baptized. Hudson Gray has been crucified with Christ and Hudson no longer lives but Christ lives in Him. And the life that Hudson lives in the body he lives by faith in the Son of God who loved him and gave Himself up for him. St. Paul wrote that about himself and I get to say it about Hudson (Galatians 2:20). We have everything in common with one another in this place. Christ lives in us. And that life, in us, includes Jesus' triumph over Satan in the desert.

And it was a triumph. What temptations were there? There are three that we know of. Command this stone to become bread. I will give you all the kingdoms of the world if you would just worship me. Throw yourself down from here to see if you can truly trust your Father. I cannot say how such words assaulted the Lord Jesus. I do know that Adam failed under Satan's viper tongue. On earth is not his equal. I fail. You fail. But there is One who holds the field, not just for a time, but forever. This confrontation between the Son of God and the Devil had been on the books since Adam failed. Jesus is the Second, Greater Adam, the one true man who does not His own will but the will of Him who sent Him (John 6:38). Jesus vanquished Satan in the wilderness but St. Luke tells us that after the defeat, Satan left the Lord Christ "until an opportune time" (Luke 4:13). The rage and spite that was hurled at the Son of God on the cross was that opportune time.

Come down from the cross, if you are the Christ (Matthew 27:40). Save yourself and us (Luke 23:39). Jesus was tested. Remember that the next time you fail. Christ is your Lord. He is your absolution. His blood has washed you are prepared you for heaven. "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering" (Genesis 22:2). But God had a ram in the thicket, didn't He? The ram, caught by its horns, in the thicket was to be the sacrifice, not Isaac. God knew that He would place His Son in the thicket. Take your Son, your only Son, Whom you love and sacrifice Him. That is God the Father telling you what He has done for you. God loved the world in this way: He gave His one and only Son that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). That is the Divine Test that defines your life. Believe it. The Lord will provide (Genesis 22:8). That is a prayer for you to utter before you eat. That is a biblical truth for you to pray as you are tempted – He provides a way escape (1 Corinthians 10:13). That "the Lord will provide" is to be in your mind as you come to this altar to receive forgiveness, life, and salvation in Christ's body and blood.

We have the faith of Abraham (*fides quae creditur*). “One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:5). The faith that Hudson has is the faith that I have is the faith that you have is the faith that Abraham had. Our most gracious God is at work in all of us. Because of His great love for us, He will test us. Going forward, we know that the Ram in the Thicket has been crucified on the altar of the cross and was raised for our justification (Romans 4:25).

Take my life and let it be
Consecrated, Lord to Thee:
Take my moments and my days,
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.