

The 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent (C)  
February 21, 2010  
Text: Luke 4:1-13

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Let me tell you a couple of short little stories. When I was in college, one of the more challenging classes I took was Chemistry. I had a great teacher, and I found chemistry far more interesting than I ever imagined it would be. But when it came time to take the final exam, I was sweating bullets. I studied really hard, and felt like I did pretty well, but still was nervous waiting for results to be posted. When I got my grade, I was happy to see that I ended up with one of the highest scores in the class.

So here's the second story. A number of years ago, a friend invited me to participate in a 10K run. Now, I've always loved running. I loved competing in track and cross country in high school. I thought it sounded like a lot of fun. The thing I wasn't thinking about was the fact that in recent years I hadn't been running regularly—and when I did run, I didn't push it that hard. That 10K run wound up being quite a test. By the time I crossed the finish line, my tongue was hanging out and I was truly all done.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, this season for paying attention to our lives and growing in faith. And each year on this Sunday we hear the story about Jesus being tested by the devil. And it becomes an opportunity for us to reflect on our own experience, our own struggles and challenges as children of God. Because life is always testing us, and often it seems that the most significant tests aren't the sort we can study for, like chemistry. Instead, the only preparation that counts is in how we live, because the most important tests show something about our character. They reveal the sort of person we are becoming.

In the background of our gospel story for today is the story of Jesus' baptism. There, beside the Jordan River, Jesus heard voice of God declare, "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased." And now, in the wilderness, Jesus is tested with regard to what sort of Son of God he will be. Will he be a Son who lives in a powerfully redemptive way, a way of forgiveness and compassion, of humility and turning the other cheek, of generosity and serving the neighbor in need? Or will he be a Son who serves mostly just himself, who will not give of himself for others, and who will finally fail to serve God's healing purposes for the world?

These tests aren't so much a matter of right and wrong. After all, what could be wrong with changing stones to bread, using miraculous power to satisfy hunger? And didn't Jesus do something very much like that when he fed the crowd of 5000? But this test really isn't about the bread. It's about Jesus using power to serve himself. Jesus wasn't born simply to serve himself. Instead, he came to give his life for the sake of the world. And there's a similar dynamic present in the other two tests as well. Receiving power to rule the world, or

creating a huge spectacle to command people's attention and allegiance—they are not the path Jesus must follow, because in the end they cannot serve God's loving purposes to rescue us from our sin, our failure to love, our hardness of heart. Taken together, the three tests invite Jesus to turn his back on his true calling, his true identity as Son of God.

I wonder how this story might speak to you. Every one of us faces a variety of temptations every day—maybe it's cheating on a diet, or cheating on our taxes, or cheating on our spouse or partner. Or maybe we find ourselves tempted with alcohol, or anger, or gambling. It seems that every kind of temptation presents us with something we desire, or something we feel compelled to do, or something we believe we deserve, or think will make us happy. But the deeper issue has to do with what sort of people we are becoming. Are we becoming people who live as though we were accountable to no one, as though the most important consideration in every situation was what we want and desire? Or are we becoming people who are learning to offer our selves to serve God's purposes of love, who are learning to follow Jesus' way of forgiveness and compassion, of humility and turning the other cheek, of generosity and serving the neighbor in need? Like Jesus, each temptation, each test we face, asks us what sort of child of God we will be.

And whatever it may be that tests us, it seems to me that often the most significant tests are connected to some gift that we have. Maybe you are someone who is ambitious. Our gospel story suggests that ambition to serve ourselves is dangerous. But ambition that is turned toward serving others, toward being God's person in the world—that can be a powerful force for good. Or maybe you're someone who makes friends easily, who is a natural community-builder. What good is it to build community if it's only all about you? But drawing people together, making room for those on the edges and on the outside—that is truly life-giving. Or maybe you are a creative person, with a love for beauty. If it's all for your own enjoyment, how does that generate anything worthwhile? But sharing your gift with others—that is truly beautiful. And I could go on. There are 100 other kinds of gifts among you—and more—and every one of them can be a way of serving yourself, or a way of being God's person in the world. In our gospel story, Jesus shows us what it looks like to resist the yammering of self and desire, and instead entrust our whole selves to God.

There's one thing about tests, though. If it's possible to pass the test, if it's possible for the test to reveal something good and genuine and full of blessing, it's also possible to fail. It's possible for the test to reveal our flaws, our woundedness, our limits. And that is why we look to Jesus as more than just a good example, more than just someone who shows us the sort of child of God we should be. We also look to him as the one who has come to meet us in our failure, in our limits, to experience this life as we do, and to embrace us with the forgiveness and mercy of God. Jesus shows us God's deep compassion,

removing every obstacle that would stand between us and God, so that we can return to God after every failure, every stumble, with the assurance that God will not turn us away.

People of God, you are God's beloved children. And your true identity and calling is to be God's person in the world. In this week ahead I'll bet you'll be tested—probably more than once—with regard to what sort of person you'll be. Maybe you'll feel you passed with flying colors, with the highest grade in the class. Or maybe it will turn out to be a painful experience, and it will reveal something important about your life. But in failure or success, God's love for us is constant. God's love is stronger than our sin or weakness or woundedness. God never fails to forgive, to show mercy, and invite us again to turn to God to receive our own true life. Thanks be to God. Amen