

First Sunday in Lent, B
Genesis 9:8-17
I Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:9-15

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I understand that dog trainers are in high demand these days—some have waiting lists that are weeks long. The reason is, there's been a huge boom in pet adoptions during the pandemic. It seemed so natural. Working from home, people had more time for a pet, they were lonely and wanted company, and often it worked out just great. But some people who adopted those cute little puppies found they were in over their heads. They didn't realize how much work goes into training a puppy, from potty training to crate training to socializing them with other dogs. Some puppies were never trained to walk calmly on a leash, which now leads to trouble. Others became so attached to their people during all this home time, that now they don't want to be left alone for any time at all. Professional trainers can be a big help in improving the behavior of both pets and owners, to support this important relationship. (*New York Times*, 2/19/2021 "The People Who Got Puppies Were in Over Their Heads")

It turns out training matters more than we might realize. And this season of Lent we are entering is a time of training. We are training in the practice of faith. We're returning to the basics, to strengthen our relationship with God.

Mark's gospel describes a kind of training period that Jesus himself went through. After he was baptized, Jesus was tested by Satan in the wilderness. We might think of this as a terrible thing, but scripture says it was the Holy Spirit that drove Jesus out to the wilderness. It became a holy training ground, a place of necessary struggle, for Jesus to practice skills he would need to stay faithful in following. Everyone needs these skills, because the truth is, none of us can get through life without struggling and being tested in some way, as we figure out how to be God's people. It's not good or bad, it's just the way things are. And God is with us to give us strength when we struggle, like the angels were there to wait on Jesus and support him. God speaks promises to us in beautiful words like God spoke to Jesus: You are my child, my beloved... I am with you always... especially when you are tested.

Mark's gospel doesn't give the details of how Satan tested Jesus, but if it went on for forty days, it must have been pretty relentless. I'm told there are some software engineers whose job it is to test a software program for glitches and build up its defenses against hacking. They spend all day long trying to break in and damage the program. That's essentially what Satan was doing with Jesus, trying to break him, putting him to the test. But God made it possible for Jesus to grow through the testing,

to become more clear in his calling and better equipped for what was ahead, till finally Jesus emerged, ready to announce: “The time is now! God’s new creation is near!”

We do know it wasn’t the end of Jesus’ testing – it was only his initial training. He would be tested again, and often, by demons and trouble and plain old weariness, by going up against religious authorities and even the Roman Empire itself. Jesus would be arrested, the way John the Baptist was. He would be killed, as John was. But for Jesus the ending would be different. He was going through all of this to bring new life to the whole world.

This year it may be somewhat easier for us to relate to this time of testing that Jesus went through. We haven’t been out in a desert with the devil and wild beasts, but we’ve had almost a year now of being attacked by a worldwide killer virus. Seriously.

The other day I saw a cartoon that showed a teenage girl with her head sunk down on the table. Her mother was patting her gently and saying comfortingly, *“Don’t worry, honey, everyone else on earth is also teetering on the edge of a nervous breakdown. Doesn’t that make you feel better?”* (Six Chix, 2/19/2021)

Well, maybe... But truly, this has been a year of profound testing, and we will not come out of this experience the same. I doubt we can predict what the changes will be, but it’s my belief that in fact God has been training us throughout all these months. God has not left us alone, not for a minute. God has waited on us—like the angels waited on Jesus. God has encouraged us. God has been shaping us and teaching us and loving us all along, and preparing us for what comes next.

During this year we’ve been blessed in some unexpected ways. We are apart physically, but in some ways we have grown closer. We’ve learned to reach out to others more intentionally. Many families have met more often by zoom than distance would allow before. We’ve been blessed by turmoil in our public life – and I do mean that, blessed with the opportunity to clarify what it means to stand for love not hate, the opportunity to step outside cocoons of privilege and see more clearly the suffering and injustice that is real, listen to voices we used to ignore as we rushed about our own business.

This pandemic has forced us to face some uncomfortable things, problems that have been with us all along but never really faced before. I’m thinking of this on a personal and family level too. Family relationships have been strained with this pandemic, marriages have felt the stress, parents and children have felt roles shifting. Sometimes cracks have appeared, adjustments needing to be made... When people we love get sick these days, it’s harder to support them—but it’s even more important. When we ourselves get sick, it’s tougher to navigate care, but we learn to find a way... Some people have lost jobs this year, some have changed employment, some have decided to

retire. We learn to find a way.

And some people are looking at their own patterns of behavior and saying, I want to make a positive change. More than one person I know decided to give up alcohol during this extended home stay. They realized that once they would start drinking, they had trouble stopping. It's better now they don't feel foggy all the time. Another person decided to end a family feud by reaching out an estranged relative. A broken relationship is now repaired.

In all kinds of ways, these times are testing us. We are seeing things in a way we didn't see before. We are trying things we haven't tried before.

We've been through all kinds of growing pains. But who ever thought life was supposed to be stable and static? Well, I actually did think that, I thought I preferred a comfortable and predictable life, but that's not what God gives most of us. And that's not good or bad, it's just the way things are. Every one of us faces testing. We have our Christian commitment tested, our identity tested, our loyalties and assumptions tested, again and again. And the good news is: *God is in this*. God does not bring the hardship. But God does bring the growth. God helps us adapt, and survive, and learn, all through God's enduring love.

There are quite a few things I've learned this year that I wish I'd come to a long time ago, things that can make me a better pastor, and mother, and daughter, and wife, and friend. Isn't it amazing how God never gives up on us, but lovingly leads us forward.

I encourage you to take some time for reflection this week, as Lent begins. I invite you to literally take out a piece of paper or journal and do some thoughtful writing, just for yourself. In what specific ways have you been put to the test in this year past? And what has come out of that testing, for you? Consider, where have angels appeared along the way, what kind of help has come? And, how are you different now, from before? How do you think God might be preparing you, or training and teaching you, these days?

In centuries past, the season of Lent was quite literally a training period. Those who wanted to become Christians through Baptism were intentionally taught and mentored all through these set-aside weeks of Lent, until finally on the eve of Easter, in a very special service in the dark of the night, they were baptized into the body of Christ. The same thing happens today in Roman Catholic communities and some Lutheran too.

I truly believe that change and growth happens in its own time, not by our calendars and wishes – or any specific season of the church year. Yet we can put ourselves in places to

receive what God has to give. And Lent is a special time to do just that. I encourage you to choose a practice of faith that will become yours in these weeks of Lent, whether it's journaling or reading or listening or praying or fasting or giving or walking or eating healthy or changing a negative habit or helping others or something else that can give life to you and to creation.

I know that as we open our hearts to God this Lent, we will not be disappointed. And I am sure, I am certain, the world will be blessed. Amen.