

“Shaped by testing”

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11
(February 26, 2023)

Here we are in the season of Lent. It comes around every year before Easter: six weeks devoted to prayer and fasting. We hold back from certain things and embrace others. All with a view to making changes in our lives. Allowing God to become more a part of us. Allowing God to make us more like Christ.

The forty days of Lent find a precedent in Jesus’ forty days of prayer and fasting in the wilderness, after which he began his ministry. But first he had to pass a test.

This morning, in our scripture readings, we heard about two tests: The *original* one, when our ancestors in the Garden ate the forbidden fruit and so failed to live out God’s intention for their lives

And the *second* test, when Jesus repelled the devil and showed there is hope for our humanity. If Jesus remained faithful to God ... if he succeeded where we have failed ... maybe he can help us find a way to be faithful too.



This will be our theme throughout the Lenten season: We’ll look at how we have been shaped, and are being re-shaped, in the image of God.

In the beginning, God fashioned our humanity from the dust of the earth. In the image of God we were created. But that image has become distorted. We’re like clay that has been twisted out of shape, so that God’s intent for us is barely recognized.



The Garden of Eden presents a lovely picture of blissful innocence, where the man and the woman are living out their lives in a lovely relationship with the earth and all its creatures, with each other, and with God.



Lucas Cranach, Adam and Eve, 1526

But these things grind to a halt when they listen to the words of a slippery serpent. They step out of relationship, choosing to become something other than their God-intended selves.

The serpent offers them a false vision of their humanity. A humanity that steps outside the bounds of its own creatureliness and seeks to become as God, claiming the ability to know good and evil all by themselves. So the relationship is broken, with disastrous consequence.



Can you think of a time when you were tested? Maybe it was in school. Nobody likes tests and exams, or the anxiety that goes with them.

I remember times I was not well-prepared, hoping that God might give me a legitimate reason for staying away. A cold perhaps? Something I could get my mother to write me a note for. Unfortunately, that never happened. I had to show up. Whatever was coming, I’d just have to find my way through.



We all go through tests of various kinds. Not only at school, but at work and in our social settings: with families, neighbours, health and finances. We're tested by the circumstances of our lives and the people who are part of them.

It's inevitable. A challenge arises, whether expected or not, and we ask ourselves: "How will I get through this?" And perhaps we also wonder: "How will this experience change me?" Can testing, sometimes, be for our good?



Rembrandt, Temptation of Christ
Sketch 3

In our Gospel reading, Jesus was tested. It happened early on, as he was beginning his ministry. He had just finished fasting forty days and forty nights. And now he was famished. And that is when the tempter comes to visit. In that weak and vulnerable state. When we are tired and hungry and feeling a bit unsure of ourselves.

The tempter came to Jesus with three questions, one right after the other. And they all begin the same way. "If you are the Son of God ..." Then prove it to me. Note that he plays on that niggling doubt about who and whose we are. "If you are the Son of God ..." If you really believe it ...

At Jesus' baptism, that is what the voice from heaven had declared: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." It was unmistakable. But now, just a few short verses later, the tempter calls that into question. "God's Son – really? Beloved – are you sure? Pleased with you – but you haven't accomplished anything!

"So, Jesus. Let's see what you are made of. Why don't you turn this stone into bread?" What better way to prove yourself? In the heat of the moment he makes it sound so reasonable. What harm could there possibly be?

Can you see what's happening? The devil calls into question Jesus' *core identity*: who he is in the very heart and soul of his being.

And also, who we are in the very heart and soul of our being. "If you are God's beloved child," the devil whispers into our ear ... seeking to undercut every word that's come from heaven, every God-given promise and word of hope. Sowing doubt and confusion. Making our legs wobble.



"If you are the Son of God," he says to Jesus. In place of that divine naming and calling, the devil offers something else.

Temptation #1: Turn this stone into bread. Don't you want to satisfy your hunger?



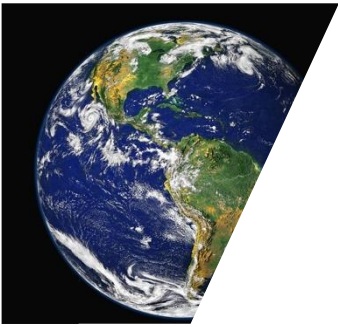
So we order second helpings. Build bigger barns and storage sheds. We take another cruise. Order up another item from the internet to be delivered directly to our door. Knowing deep down that none of these will ever *truly* satisfy.

Temptation #2: Throw yourself off the pinnacle of the temple. Why not do something showy, make a name for yourself?

The world loves celebrity. The bolder the better. The more outrageous and unexpected and shocking the behaviour – the bigger the headlines, the higher the number of hits and likes, the greater the number of followers ... and votes as well.



Temptation #3: Look at all the kingdoms of this world. You know they could be yours?



See the seductiveness of power! The temptation to rule – if not the world, at least your own bit of territory. Your own little fiefdom, wherever that happens to be.

These temptations are the same as they have always been. They are everywhere-present. But make no mistake – they are not God's kingdom. They are not what God desires for Jesus. Or for us.

The tempter always points us in a *false* direction. And the question is: What kind of person will Jesus be? What kind of person will any of us be? Will we turn away from the Realm of God?



Sometimes it's under stress that a person really shines. Challenge a student or an athlete, or even an ordinary person of faith, and they'll rise to meet that challenge. It may surprise you. Perhaps you didn't realize the potential that was in them.

Yet testing brings it out. Testing can reveal a part of ourselves that may be hidden. All of a sudden we see the stuff that we are made of. And so we are amazed.

Of course, we can be disappointed too. Because sometimes people let us down. And we let ourselves down. Not so with Jesus. Where the first humans in the garden of God's creation failed the test, Jesus rebuffs the tempter's suggestions.



Are you facing some form of testing in your life right now? What are the circumstances that confront you? Sometimes we live on a knife-edge of success or failure. We teeter on the brink!

Knowing that Jesus *shares* our time of testing can make a difference! Knowing that he has been there: that he has walked on this earth, in the shoes of our humanity. That he understands our weakness. And that he is with us to strengthen us, to lead us and show us the way.

Every day we make decisions and not all of them are good ones. We don't always get it right. The crumpled piece of paper reminds us of the times in our lives when things have not gone well. We tried and we failed.

Yet we do not despair! We make mistakes, many of them. And we learn! And the Good News is there is always a *fresh* sheet of paper waiting for us!



“Let’s have another go,” says Jesus, “you and me together.” So we pick up our lives and walk the path, hand in hand.



In testing, we search for a deeper self, a truer self. That is one of the gifts of Lent. This time of year we have the opportunity to ask – what is our *authentic* self? What is our God-given identity? And how can I be faithful to it?

It’s not just a matter of us trying harder. Rather, it’s allowing God’s love to take hold of us. God’s Spirit to live within and among us. God’s forgiveness and new life to re-create us.



I want to finish with a story about a very ordinary person who endured hard testing, and became a more loving, caring servant of God because of it.



This person I know lost two grown children, one after the other. The first through disease and the next through tragic circumstance. She loved them dearly. And the grief of losing them was overwhelming.

The temptation for *her*, I suppose, would be to withdraw. To withhold her love. Because loving others, then losing them, is painful beyond description.

Her motherly love might have withered under duress, but it didn’t! When an opportunity came to volunteer on a refugee sponsorship committee, she stepped forward. She had no experience with newcomers. But her heart was in the right place. She had so much love to share.

And I saw her do that. She invited these young women into her life and cared for them as though they were her own. She took them shopping for clothes. When the time came, she celebrated the birth of their children. They called her “Grandma.” She was their new *Canadian* Grandma.



When we go through testing we discover who we *really* are. And we find ways of living that out more fully, ways that we might not have imagined.

The invitation in our scriptures today is to become more of your true, authentic, God-given self. To listen to the voice from heaven that names you and calls you. And not to turn away. When we are tested, Jesus is *with* us to walk the path. And he will show us the way. Amen.