

TESTED!

Genesis 2:15-17; Matthew 4:1-11

1st Sunday of Lent

As a pastor I am often asked by persons experiencing difficult times, "Is God testing me?" Or "Why is God testing me?" People seem to assume that God is the originator of the tests in our life. One particular incident recently made me think about the concept of tests.

Many of you know that my neighbor, who grew up with my daughter, and I grew up with her mother, experienced the horror of her father beating her and then murdering her husband. With her life completely turned upside down, with two small daughters, unable to return to their home, with no income, no husband and, in her words, "My father took my best friend from me." She sat in my living room and lamented, "I know the Bible says God will never put more on you than you can stand. But I have more than I can handle right now."

Immediately, I responded, "This is not of God. It is of the devil!" God did not cause your father to shoot your husband. The devil was present in that action. God is here, with you and your girls, as the community surrounds you with love and gives you money to get through this difficult time. God is here, and your faith in God will sustain you."

As I studied the scriptures for today, I became even more certain of the words I spoke to her that day. Looking at the first reading from Genesis, the temptation for Adam and Eve was provided to them by the serpent, and they succumbed to the temptation rather than living by the rule given them by God.

Looking at the second reading from the Gospel according to Matthew we again see the evil one coming to Jesus when he was most vulnerable, providing temptations to ignore God and give in to his weaknesses. Doing the will of God is not easy. Temptations surround us and our humanity is weak, prone to give in. In the passage of Matthew the primary focus is on doing the will of God alone and saying no to other gods. But in order to know God's will we must first KNOW God. Jesus is an example for us in this way. Jesus will not accept just any word from scripture as God's word to him at that moment. For Jesus, it's not just about God's truth; it's also about God's time, God's call, and most of all about God's love. Jesus knows God's truth, God's time, most of all; Jesus knows the love of God.

As we are faced with our own wildernesses we must ask several questions. Will I walk with God whether or not I get that job, whether or not that cancer is healed, whether or not my loved one pulls through a life-threatening situation? You see, knowing the love of God, I can honestly affirm that I will walk with God, even grow closer to God, regardless of the outcomes. Not because God is testing me, but because I choose God when the evil one seeks me in the weakest times of my life.

That is the sign of an unconditionally surrendered life. The Spirit-filled life which Jesus lived was a life that was unconditionally surrendered to God regardless of the outcome. Jesus was hurled into the desert to fast for forty days and forty nights (probably recalling by way of

parallelism Israel's 40 years in the wilderness, where she grumbled at God because of the lack of food; as written in Deuteronomy) and Jesus was at his weakest that the Devil came to him to tempt him. It is a safe thing to assume that the Devil will attack us when we are at our weakest and when we are the most vulnerable. In this case, it was a temptation regarding hunger and food, power and weakness.

God does not want puppets. God wants willing servants who believe and trust him. He establishes the boundaries of life and asks that his children honor those boundaries of their own accord – not because they have to, but because they want to.

There the devil found Jesus who had been driven to this place by the Spirit. There in the wilderness his destiny must be decided. There in the wilderness he had to set his course for the rest of his life as the one clearly designated and affirmed as the Son of the One who had spoken at his baptism, saying, "I am well pleased with him."

So far, so good. God is pleased with him. But what would please God now? What are the ramifications of this affirmation? For what was he called and to what was he to direct his life from this time on? What would it mean in the future for him to be a faithful Son of the living Lord? These must have been his meditations through the forty days of wilderness dwelling.

There, in the midst of such considerations, the tempter appears. A voice is raised suggesting possible answers to the questions that must have haunted those forty days.

"God is important, but you can't serve him if you die of hunger," the voice says. "See this God-forsakenness around you? Surely the One you call Father has little interest in you or your future if he leaves you to die here in the wilderness! Since you are the 'Son of the Father' as he said you were, surely you can take care of this situation easily. Turn these stones of the wilderness into bread. Save yourself. You are of no earthly good to God nor will you be of any earthly good to the world if you end up as a skeleton in the desert." So spoke the alien voice suggesting that the first and foremost responsibility of this man was survival.

"Bread is important," came the reply. "I do not deny it. But bread alone will neither define me nor my mission nor my place on this earth." His word comes from the scripture, the word Moses spoke to Israel in one of his parting speeches. He told them that God had sustained them through their years in the wilderness "to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." (Deut. 8:3) Vital though bread may be, it is even more important to take seriously that which God requires of those who call themselves by his name. That was to be a primary concern of Israel . . . and Jesus.

Mother Teresa was tested as she walked the streets of Calcutta seeking a place to begin ministry to those sick and in need. She revealed that she felt as if God had abandoned her as she sought a house where she could start her work. At the end of one particularly difficult day she wrote in her journal, "I wandered the streets the whole day. My feet are aching, and

I have not been able to find a Him. And I also get the tempter telling me, 'Leave all this, go back to the convent from which you came.'

Eventually Mother Teresa found her home... The Missionaries of Charity...which now feeds 500,000 families each year in Calcutta alone, treats 90,000 leprosy patients, and educates 20,000 children.

Jesus did not give in to the temptations before him. Mother Teresa persevered and did not give in to the voice that urged her to go home and forget helping the sick. We may be tempted to go home, to give in to the voice that tries to get us to forget what God is calling us to do. But, God is with us, and our faith in God is what sustains us as we choose to follow the will of God.