

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Help Us Pass the Test"
Dr. J. Dent

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(Lent 1)

We all go through tests throughout our whole lives. We remember the formal tests of school. We remember how adults told us if we were smart and advanced, or slow and not so quick. We remember being able to perform well. We remember not being able to spell or do math or write under pressure. Testing is inevitable in school. And for many of us it went on well into our late teens and twenties. I remember praying about tests and exams. They say people in the foxholes during war time and those who certainly know they are going to fail often reach out to God during this times of desperation, no matter whether they considered themselves atheists or agnostics.

Tests happen throughout our lives, not only when we are young and in elementary, high school or university. Parents are tested, and so are grandparents. Parents are tested as they seek to raise their children well. They are tested as are Catherine and Richard today are tested, to see what they will do in raising their child in the faith. Parents make decisions with the limited time they have to make a priority for Scripture reading and church attendance and answering the tough questions of faith as their children ask them. Children are wondering if God is just like Santa Claus, something to grow out of and no longer believe in. Parents and grandparents have many challenges and tests for their young ones, asking why life is the way it is, and why it's not fair. At least I remember asking that question an awful lot, usually after one brother or the other would beat me up, in some creative new way.

There were other kinds of tests happen at home and at school. There were the tests where a child would decide whether they knew better than their parents at any particular moment and do what they were asked to do or not. There were moments at school when I had to decide if what was being discussed on the bus, or in the halls was worth fighting over. I wasn't a big fighter, but I still had to decide whether the tough guys' lies were worth putting my health on the line.

And the tests continue at work, where we can report something about another worker or a boss, or not. How much trouble would we risk to our

careers or our employment opportunities? Did you hear about that engineer that chose to quit his job rather than work for the new employer who also happened to be a major manufacturer of military weapons and land mines? The tests don't stop when we are little.

They just keep changing shape. The two humans in the garden of Eden had a test put to them, probably more than just the one that was recorded in the Bible. It was about how they would take care of the garden and about boundaries. Would they honour God's boundaries, whether they understood them or not? Or would they choose to violate those instructions and boundaries because another rational argument was put to them. We know what they did. Eve listened and reasoned and ate and Adam just ate.

But the consequences were real and the spiritual death was real, the broken relationship between God and his creation was established and became the norm. Brokenness began to enter not only relationships, with the violence to come between their sons, but also the violence and evil to be cultivated in towns and cities. And so it continues today, even in St. John's.

I suppose it is fairly easy to admit that life is in many ways a series of tests. What is harder to admit is when we fail them. It is hard to admit that we are not the people that we often portray to others. A deep seated rebellion toward God is within many of us, perhaps in us all.

The Psalmist admits that when he chooses to try to hide his sin from God, he experiences all kinds of terrible consequences. It's as if his whole body were drying up, wasting away in groaning. But when he confesses his sins and seeks to be true and honest before God, he has not only relief, but also a sense of God being a refuge, a protection, rather than a policeman running him down. How we respond to God is usually a good indication of how we are portraying God's character. If we are hiding from Him in some way, we see Him as a fault finder and judge. If we are seeking Him and looking for honestly following Him in a given situation, then He becomes the empowerment and creative solution maker. So the Psalmist points us in the direction of being teachable and honest before God, not like a horse or a plowing animal that needs a bit in their mouth to direct them.

Paul wanted us to know that there were two major tests in the history of the world. The first test was Adam and Eve's. We know what happened there. The second test is for the person he calls the Second Adam, the Lord Jesus

Christ. And this person passed the test, reversing the damage of the first test for all those who would receive Jesus' person and work. Jesus' test would involve being faithful to God even to the point of being tortured to death on a cross.

Of course, this wasn't Jesus' only test. He was tested first of all, before he even began his preaching and healing ministry directly by the devil in the desert. And the three tests he faced there, I believe we also face. The first was simply the hunger test. I say "simply" because we all face deciding what we will put in our mouths. Many of us have severe restrictions and dire consequences if we put something in our mouths against the instructions and counsel of our doctors and nutritionists. But still many of us choose to do what we know is out of bounds for us, simply because we know how good it tastes. I remember one woman telling me that she would rather die than be restricted from the carbohydrates that were her favorites. Perhaps she will die that way. I don't know. So the temptation for Jesus to make a loaf of bread from a stone was a real one. Ours is more likely whether we have to choose between God and chocolate, which would we choose? That would be a hard choice for some of us. But if chocolate is no big deal for you, then what is? You fill in the blank. As I said to the children last week, fasting during Lent is simply an abstinence from a food or activity to say, "I love you Jesus, more than TV or movies, more than coffee or tea, more than sweets...more than _____" and you fill in the blank. Life is more than food and entertainment.

The second test is the suicide test. Our lives can become exceedingly complicated and difficult. Some of us will choose to think (with the help of the devil) that the only way out is by doing away with ourselves. Jesus was tempted to throw himself off a high building. We are tempted to swerve out into traffic, or take too many pills, or even throw ourselves off of one of the beautiful trails around this wonderful island. But Jesus is reminded by the Scriptures that although we are tested in many ways, we shouldn't test God by taking our own lives. The length of our lives and the quality of that life is in God's hands, not ours. So please get the support and help you need if you are seriously on this route in anyway in your life.

And the final test is the power test. The devil was trying to tell Jesus that he didn't have to go through all the difficult things of his ministry, certainly not to the cross or the horrific end he faced. The devil told him that there was a short cut. He knew that he was to be king and Messiah, ruler of the whole

earth, to whom all the peoples of every nation would turn. Why not take the short cut and worship the devil, then the world would belong to him right away. Because you see, the devil was given the real estate of the world to use as he saw fit, when the first humans decided to trust him rather than God. So this was a real temptation, in fact probably the biggest real estate deal in the history of the planet. The devil would literally give him the world to rule. But thankfully, Jesus decided to not take any short cuts. He would worship only God, His Father, and pass the test. At which point, Jesus receives supernatural ministry due to the fact that he had not eaten for forty days. It is possible to go without food for forty days, not without water, but without food.

And Jesus passed the test. Praise be to God! His passing the test meant that we now have a way to know and relate to God, to get past our sins, and be in good relationship with the living Lord. Do you know you have this kind of relationship? Make sure you do. It is the center of life, the whole point of Lent and the key test of all tests.

The beauty of this test is simply giving your life to the One who gave it to you first. And when you do, you are home. And there is no better place to be than home.

Help us pass the test, what I've entitled this sermon is really a translation of something we say quite often. You know that part in the Lord's Prayer where we say, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Have you ever wondered what that means? What that really means is, "Help us pass the test and make sure the evil one doesn't have his way in our lives."

Let us pray.