

# Tested

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent (C) – 3/9/24

Seventy, sixty, fifty...and, now, forty. Days and nights. In the Wilderness. Being tested. Like Noah was when the waters rose. Like Elijah, on his way to Mt. Horeb, fleeing an autocrat who wanted to kill him. Like Moses up there on Mt. Sinai, in the cloud, getting from God the laws God wanted his people to live by. In Latin, *Quadragesima*, derived from “forty” and “fortieth,” is the beautiful older name for this Sunday, the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent. (It’s much nicer than the more common word derived from Italian’s ‘forty’: ‘quarantine’, the waiting period imposed on ships in the harbor, to stop the spread of plague.) We call this Sunday *Quadragesima* since there are forty days of Lent from now until Good Friday, not counting Sundays. We don’t count Sundays in Lent as being ‘of Lent’ because Sundays are Feasts of the Resurrection: in Lent but not of Lent, and hence free of its particular disciplines.<sup>1</sup>

Except, maybe not. I mean, if one’s discipline is being a little kinder than usual, seeking out more ways to show compassion, why take Sunday off from that? Why take any day off? Best to observe it *ala* the laws of Moses, perhaps, and treat it as a day of sabbath rest. Take especial care for yourself each Sunday in Lent, making sure to be a little kinder to yourself than you usually are, and show a little more compassion and understanding to the man or woman in the mirror than you otherwise might.

Forty days, forty nights. Of life as Jesus knows it, ritually speaking. As the gospels tell it, Jesus had a little more than a thousand days left to live after his great temptation, his time of testing, his forty days in the wild of hunger, thirst, dreams, and the devil, though he didn’t know the exact day or hour until it was upon him. A thousand days

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<sup>1</sup> I’ll never get over not being told this as a young person; thank you for indulging my repeating the point.

to make good on the promises of forty. A thousand days more to pass the tests he'd (mostly) passed when those forty days were over.

We sometimes skip over that part, the bit that comes at the end: "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time" (Lk.4:13). That's what we call a strategic retreat, not a capitulation. The devil had tried coming after Jesus when he was alone in the wilderness, driven there by his own Spirit, or God's, which is the same thing, except it didn't quite feel that way. Turns out that Jesus was stronger by himself than the devil expected, able to go toe to toe with him on scripture and logic both, through thirst and hunger, seeing through the devil's lies without none there to distract him. You might've thought that Satan would've worked this out about people when he tried, but failed, to break the spirit of Job. 'The more they hurt, the weaker they'll be,' that old liar probably figured. 'After all, I'm offering them what they say they want: ease and power, if only they'll give up all pretense of integrity.'

But it turns out that that's not what people really want; human beings can endure almost anything if we know, or at least believe, it's for a good reason or a good cause. What we really want is something worth striving for, or struggling against. We can't take either ease or pain if there's no good reason for them or some good waiting at the end. Once Job figured out that he was being tested by God, the devil, the universe, or life itself, all forms of the same thing, to see if he would give up his integrity, self-understanding, and self-worth, he set his face like flint and decided not to do so. It took the Lord God himself, giving Job the 'Who do you think you are?' treatment at the end – showing Job that he didn't matter, none of us does, not in the grand scheme of things, not to God – to break him.

It was much the same with Jesus. Nobody broke him – not Pilate, not Herod, not Judas, not Peter, and not the devil – until right at the end, on the cross, when Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" It was God's ultimate

silence and apparent indifference that led Jesus to despair and finally broke his spirit, and with it his life. Forty ritual days from now – symbolizing his thousand or so days and nights being tested among people, as the devil hung around in the background, in the shadows, waiting for an opportune time.

The first test looked easy. Turning stones into bread – I mean, why not, if you're hungry. Who'd it hurt? Who'd even know? Except that, as Jesus says, we “do not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.” Listening for that word whilst famished was apparently part of what Jesus needed to do – as was having to listen to the devil. It's funny: at Cana, Jesus turned water into wine he didn't even want because his mom wanted him to, but our here refused to turn stones into bread because he thought that's what his father wanted. “Mom wants me to be generous and make friends; Dad wants me to suffer until I've learned something.”

And what did he learn? That the next temptation was far more tempting. It's not to take care of yourself, but to take care of others. Seize Power and Fix Everything. The devil says, “You can do it, and you know you want to. Why leave this earth to me? Your Father wants you to change it; you know this. And don't wait until you talk people into giving you the power that's not even theirs; the kingdom of God is no more a democracy than the kingdom of Hell – even less so, maybe, since God can overthrow me anytime, but what can I do about Him? That's the reason we're in this pickle to start with. But you can change all that, Jesus. Make them listen to you. You know you can. Didn't your Dad just the other day tell them they had to?”

No, says Jesus, still hungry as a big dog. “One must worship only God, not oneself, one's achievements, or the devil,” one can imagine him saying. “Worship only love, not power; serve mercy and justice, not safety and revenge. Fixing the world by myself would mean holding all the power in it to myself, which is what worshipping the devil really amounts to. Not today, Satan.”

Okay. Now for the hard one, the big test: make your heavenly Father prove that He cares. Throw yourself from the pinnacle of the temple and see if He doesn't save you. If He does – great. He did what He said He would do. If He doesn't, then you'll know what we all know: God is not going to save you. God is not going to save us. God is not going to save anyone. Look around at all the people God hasn't saved; you think you're special? Go ahead then. Make Him show you who He is.

The devil's got a point this time, and Jesus knows it. The only comeback he gives is, "Thou shalt not put the Lord God to the test." That's not quite the same thing as, "I don't have to test God; I know for sure God will save me." It's more of a "Let's not go there." It brings up something that gnaws and naggles at him from the wilderness to the garden: do I, Jesus, have to die to save the world – and if so, why?

"...until an opportune time," indeed. Not today, Satan? No worries; there's always tomorrow. He knows he's planted a seed. 'Into what sort of plant will it flower?' he wonders. 'What fruit will it bear? Let's wait and see. We'll know soon enough.'

Tested. It's a relatively young verb in English. Some even consider it an American invention. The noun 'test' was used far earlier, in the sense of an assay: how much gold or silver really is in this lead? The test will show. Let us test it to find out – if it's true, and what it's worth. As with stones, so with people: let us put them to the test. Test them to see what they're worth. Put them in the fire, as one does ore, and see what of them melts off and what burns away – turns to ash, which is not gold, nor is it silver. The test attests to this. You are not, Jesus says, to do this to God. We are not, he says, to try find out whether God is true, what God is worth, or to seek to learn whether what we think God is, and what God really is, are the same thing. Apparently God and the devil can do it to us, or at least to him. But, he says, we are not to do it to God. Which does rather beg the question, which is a form of the great question of Job: why not?

The short answer is, because we don't have the power to make ourselves or the world, and also that we're all going to die. As Job says, "Man that is born of woman is of a few days, and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not. And dost thou open thine eyes upon such an one, and bringest me into judgment with thee? (Job 14:1-3). We cannot put any of these things to the test, much less judge the results, any more than Job could answer the questions with which God tested him. One must not test God because one cannot test God. It would be like trying to test whether or not creation works, or whatever brought us all into being. We can get close, so close, to knowing how or why things began. Replicate it? Nope. We are sure *that* we were born, of course. But are we sure why? Hmm. Even to ask the question is to know the answer.

The first two verses of Job 14 used to be offered as a prayer during the Burial of the Dead, but the church removed them years ago because people found them too sad, too depressing, and not adequately focused on the resurrection. I find them to be quite the opposite: sobering, honest, poignant, and powerful, particularly when you add in verse 3. 'We are both mortal,' Job tells his accusers. 'And you, knowing this, will judge me for questioning and lamenting how I suffer while I live?' One does not further test someone whom life is testing to their limit. Cursed be the one who moves his neighbor's landmark, says Deuteronomy. Even more cursed be one who adds burdens to an already burdened soul.

In any case, resurrection doesn't matter unless what is brought to life has really died – and Jesus's problem, his weakness, even, is that he's not sure that he has to or why, at least not yet, not when his Spirit drives him into the wild for his first big test. The test of this lasts his whole life long. It isn't over until he accepts, forty ritual days from now on Good Friday as he gasps for breath in the midday sun, that he is in fact going to die. He hopes, but does not know, that his death will save the world, that fulfilling the human condition when he didn't have to will be what it takes to break the hold

our mortality, and our fear of it, have over us. The whole point of his sacrifice is that he does not, and cannot, know for sure.

‘Tested’ in this gospel passage used to read as ‘tempted’. The two verbs are related, but not quite the same. Chocolates at the checkout counter tempt me to buy them and eat them. Those who put them at the checkout counter are testing me to see whether I’ll give into temptation. The chocolates don’t care; the chocolate seller does. Therein lies the difference.

Power tempts Jesus in the wilderness. First it is the power to serve himself, to meet his legitimate needs with the power of God that is within him. Then it is the power to save all people by becoming like the one who gave up everything in order to do what he wanted, not what God wanted. Lastly, what tempts Jesus is the power to know for sure what is that God wanted, and why. Satan uses these powers, and God’s own words in scripture, to test Jesus, to see who and what he truly is. God, by having driving Jesus into the wild, is also testing Jesus to see who He truly is. What do I/We, as God, become when burdened by need, desire, and mortality?

Jesus resists the temptations, but is not finished with the test. The devil goes away and leaves him alone, awaiting an opportune time to test him again – and not only with these temptations. Life can be like that; perhaps it always is. A meme I came across some forty days ago, not counting Sundays, had a picture on it of a sad-faced badger wearing Jed Clampett’s fedora and lamenting, “God is testing me and I have not studied.” I hear you, I said. I get it. How will the forty days of Lent test us this year? Will we resist the temptations, whatever they are? Will we pass the test? Let us pray for the strength to do so and the grace to know it, as he did. To be sure. *Amen.*