

"The Tests of Life"

Date: Feb. 29, 2004

Text: Genesis 2: 15-17, 3:1-7; Luke 4: 1-13

Two stories...one from the Old Testament, the other the New. In each people have great opportunities; in each the figure of the devil symbolizes the temptations of daily living; in each human beings are tested or challenged.

Have you ever thought of the similarity between the Garden of Eden story and Jesus in the wilderness? The early Christians did and that connection was emphasized right up through the Middle Ages. In both the Old and New Testament, we are dealing with what is regarded to be one of life's ultimate challenges: EACH DAY DO WE USE GOD FOR OUR OWN PURPOSES OR ARE WE TO BE USED BY GOD?

Numerous times every week our relationship with our Creator is tested. Will God be there just to suit our convenience or is it be more of a permanent partnership? That's what's being played out in the temptation story just read.

First Jesus is tempted to satisfy his immediate need. He is hungry so why not get some food? Is there anyone here who hasn't at some point thought of religion in terms of instant gratification? I can remember as a child praying for a nice day for a family picnic, then for the right person to say yes to a prom date and so on through adult years. God stay around to help me out when I am in need. How tempting.

Second, Jesus is tempted to do something to gain popularity. How many teenagers or younger start smoking just to be one of the gang? How many of us go along with crude put-downs at work just because we want to be an "o.k. person?" Jesus could have been just a miracle worker and people would have flocked around without truly grasping our Lord's purpose. Being popular- how tempting.

Third, Jesus is tempted to acquire power. An argument could be made that "power" is what life is all about - not just in politics but with sexuality, vocations and so much else. "I'll beat them" is a common emotional pattern and "them" can be legion. Another part of this temptation involves control. So often in relationships or in organizations like the church disputes arise because one individual or a group wants to be in control of everything. "To rule the roost" - how tempting.

Do you see how Jesus' temptations mirror what would be going on throughout his ministry and what goes on in our lives each day? I remember a cartoon character named Barnabbas who wanted some help from God and had an attitude very similar to ours. After getting the help he sought, Barnabbas thought God would leave but his Creator stayed around. Finally Barnabbas said, "God, I know that you are busy so you can go." God replied, "No, that's okay. I have plenty of time for you." Do you know what Barnabbas replied? "That's what I was afraid of." It's very tempting to bring God around to suit our desires rather than honestly striving to be faithful to His ways.

Would you agree that one of the most challenging, perhaps ultimate tests, of human existence is what we make of the life that God has given to us? Adam and Eve failed the test! They could have had such a wonderful life but they wanted everything. Indeed they wanted to be like God! Some people like to think of Adam and Eve as the first people who lived but others, equally committed Christians, find the story filled with contradictions and they prefer to think of the couple standing for all humanity. The word Adam in Hebrew actually means "man" and Eve represents "woman" so it is possible that the writers were thinking in symbolic rather than literal terms. Regardless of which interpretation you prefer, this story presents an insightful reflection on human existence. The behavior of Adam and Eve bears great similarity to our actions! Even the smallest child quickly learns the phrase "No, It's mine". Presbyterians generally no longer believe in original sin, the doctrine that states that sin has been passed down genetically from Adam, but the Church does hold that the drift away from the divine relationship seems to be inherent in human nature because usually the song of life is "me, me, me."

Jesus, in stark contrast, indicates in the temptation experience that, unlike Adam and Eve, he will not cave in to the allures of life but will hold fast to his mission and commitment. His ability to resist temptation even when it might have been possible to escape death gives us a model for holding firm when faced with our personal temptations confronted each day. With his help, and certainly we need that, we can redesign our lives so that it's a two-way street between ourselves and our Maker. Here's the Jesus way: seek God every day of our lives but not just for selfish reasons but rather so that we can be used by God in helping others.

The Mel Gibson movie, "The Passion," stirred up a great deal of controversy when released because of its graphic depictions of the sufferings of our Lord. Similar portraits of the horror surrounding Jesus' last hours were very common in the Middle Ages. One painting portrayed Christ hanging on the cross while his blood flows down upon Adam's skull at the foot of the cross. Overly descriptive, perhaps, but the artist was trying visually to convey the power of what Christ has done. His life, death and resurrection has made it possible for the Adam and Eve part of existence, the selfishness, to be put into its proper place.

This week think of Christ standing by your side as you wrestle with whatever is going on in your life. We all face temptations: satisfying our material desires, striving too much for popularity, seeking to be in control of all situations. Jesus in rejecting the temptations of the wilderness helps us move beyond a constant "me-ism". Christ has done nothing less than help us begin to grow up and live as God intended.

"Testing" is an in word these days. In education, students are tested more and more. Some times it helps and sometimes it is a disaster because it doesn't connect with the total student. Health tests are important: women should get mammograms, men PSA tests for prostate. But have we ever considered the spiritual tests that challenge us each day?

Originally, Lent was a time of testing for new converts to Christianity. Often for two or three years they would have been tested on the understanding and depth of their faith before joining the church at Easter. We no longer have such examinations but still Lent, this 40 -day period before Easter, continues to provide us an opportunity to look and see where the tests of our lives lie and how we are handling them. Always we remember that Christ has made a new way of life possible. To paraphrase the Apostle Paul: the Old Adam can be put aside and the new you can begin to emerge.