

## In Times of Testing

Fellow sojourners, the gospel story on this first Sunday in the season of Lent invites us to come alongside Jesus in the desert wilderness – a space in which survival depends on careful stewardship of sometimes sparse resources, a space through which the path forward is often unclear. Lent offers space in time for character examination and character building. Let's wonder together this morning about the ways in which our character is tested when we find ourselves in desert wilderness spaces.

I invite you to join your spirits with mine in a moment of prayer, closing your eyes if it helps to open your awareness to our affirming God's steady presence. Holy Loving Spirit, we are grateful for freedom to gather this morning – on the live stream and on this land, which has been loved by First Nations and others across time and where we are now weaving our way of community. We long for you to reveal to us what we need to see about the ways we are being tested. Strengthen us. Increase our readiness to resist temptations that strain and threaten to tear at our identity as children of Love. We pray this as followers of our great teacher, Jesus. Amen.

Many wise words have been offered on the topic of strength of character – sometimes referred to as moral fiber.

John Wooden, legendary men's college basketball coach famously said, "*The true test of a man's character is what he does when no one is watching.*"

George Orwell, brilliant 20<sup>th</sup> century English author, wrote this: "*The real test of character is how you treat someone who has no possibility of doing you any good.*"

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stated this: "*The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.*"

Now, our opening words from a neighbor for this morning came from Jack Gantos. As a 17-year old, white, college-bound person, he was incarcerated in the early 70s for involvement in drug trafficking. Learning and growing through that experience, he went on to author children's books and a memoir. Gantos echoed Rev. Dr. King through the lens of his own experience, saying, *"Someone once said anyone can be great under rosy circumstances, but the true test of character is measured by how well a person makes decisions during difficult times."*

I would suggest to us this morning that an experience of temptation is an experience during which we must make a conscious choice that will reveal something about the strength and substance of our character. **I wonder: are you currently in a time of testing? Is there a particular temptation you would like to confront with the best of your character?**

Confession. I can think of two aspects of my life in which I am experiencing specific temptations – one is part of my relationship with myself and the other is part of a relationship with another person in my life. In both cases, I am tempted to stay in comfortable, unhealthy ruts. I suppose you could say I am susceptible to temptation by inertia. I feel as though I have been able to get by through sheer stubbornness, able to even manipulate my ruts to move around problems instead of confronting them head on. And God and I are watching to see if something healthier than inertia will rise up from the strength and substance of my character.

I encourage you to show yourself care in the form of curiosity today. Temptation is not just a biblical vocabulary term. When we can name our temptations honestly, we can begin to see how those forces and habits affect the rest of our living. We can grow in character by welcoming times of testing.

Turning to the gospel story, I want to ask us a question that comes from a form of Sunday school called Godly Play. It's a question asked of children in some spaces every week. It goes like this: what part of this story is about you?

When Jesus is tempted to transform stones into bread, I think it is about when we become so self-centered that we try to command that our needs be met as instantaneously as possible. I find that relatable; I imagine you might as well.

When Jesus is tempted to jump from a high place, I think it could be about when we become so self-isolated that we act as though we don't matter – and we even might risk our well-being.

When Jesus is tempted to worship evil (it's right there, it's in his face all the time, he could worship it, he could go with it), it's about when we give too much of our heart devotion to unloving powers that are false (no matter how controlling they attempt to be).

So what kind of Son of God is Jesus in these moments?

For him, when tempted to command that his needs be met instantaneously, he takes a breath and realizes that a quick fix probably won't deeply satisfy him. There's something more.

When tempted to risk his safety and assume it doesn't matter (with some idea of God being out there to help him but nobody's paying attention), he instead recognizes that he won't do well to abuse the love of God that is present to him (the love of God deeply within himself and that he can experience through others).

And when Jesus is tempted to fall down, to worship and comply to the oppressive force of the tempter, he realizes that God's love is the only fitting recipient of his ultimate devotion.

In our contemporary reading for today, I appreciate Mary Luti's question: "What kind?" What kind of child of God are we? And it's through the times of testing, through recognizing honestly where we are tempted – that we can welcome our character to rise up more fully and show its strength.

I'd like to close by offering these words of blessing from Jan Richardson. I invite you to close your eyes at the beginning of this Lenten season. This is a part of a blessing entitled "Where the Breath Begins." So, as you close your eyes and continue to be curious about where your desert wilderness is (what really is testing the strength of your character), hear these words:

*"Dry  
and dry  
and dry  
in each direction...*

*It's true that  
you may need  
to do some crumbling,  
yes.*

*That some things  
you have protected  
may want to be  
laid bare,  
yes.*

*That you will be asked  
to let go  
and let go,  
yes.*

*But listen.  
This is what  
a desert is for.*

*If you have come here  
desolate,  
if you have come here  
deflated,  
then thank your lucky stars  
the desert is where  
you have landed—  
here where it is hard  
to hide,  
here where it is unwise  
to rely on your own devices,  
here where you will  
have to look  
and look again  
and look close  
to find what refreshment waits  
to reveal itself to you."*

Friends, what a gift we offer to each other in our presence during this Lenten season. Let us enter with faith and conviction that God will reveal the strength of our character to us to confront all that faces us in times of testing. God's love is counting on us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll  
St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)  
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Matt. 4:1-11, "What Kind"